Journal of Near-Death Studies

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GUEST EDITORIAL
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JOURNAL OF NEAR-DEATH STUDIES (formerly ANABIOSIS) is sponsored by the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS). The Journal publishes articles on near-death experiences and on the empirical effects and theoretical implications of such events, and on such related phenomena as out-of-body experiences, deathbed visions, the experiences of dying persons, comparable experiences occurring under other circumstances, and the implications of such phenomena for our understanding of human consciousness and its relation to the life and death processes. The Journal is committed to an unbiased exploration of these issues, and specifically welcomes a variety of theoretical perspectives and interpretations that are grounded in empirical observation or research.

The INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR NEAR-DEATH STUDIES (IANDS) is a world-wide organization of scientists, scholars, near-death experiencers, and the general public, dedicated to the exploration of near-death experiences (NDEs) and their implications. Incorporated as a nonprofit educational and research organization in 1981, IANDS' objectives are to encourage and support research into NDEs and related phenomena; to disseminate knowledge concerning NDEs and their implications; to further the utilization of near-death research by health care and counseling professionals; to form local chapters of near-death experiencers and interested others; to sponsor symposia and conferences on NDEs and related phenomena; and to maintain a library and archives of near-death-related material. Friends of IANDS chapters are affiliated support groups in many cities for NDErs and their families and for health care and counseling professionals to network locally. Information about membership in IANDS can be obtained by writing to IANDS, P. O. Box 502, East Windsor Hill, CT 06028.

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Editor’s Foreword

This issue of the Journal focuses on the meaning and applications of near-death experiences (NDEs). In a Guest Editorial, parapsychology editor and NDEr Rhea White describes the impact of her NDE and her ongoing struggle to integrate the experience into her life. That lifelong project, still in progress, awakened White to the role of cultural context for NDEs and for what she calls exceptional human experiences in general. White suggests that cultural resources amplify the personal meaning of such experiences, and that in turn these experiences are a stimulus for spiritual growth of the culture at large.

Next, psychologist J. Timothy Green discusses the overlap between NDEs and shamanistic journeys. He argues that near-death studies are evolving from a largely academic pursuit to a more clinical and applied science, and that the study of shamanism, which has been perfecting its techniques for tens of thousands of years, can help us understand NDEs and develop practical applications of these experiences. Green proposes that Western medical science, as it begins to explore alternative healthcare techniques, is poised to pursue the rigorous scientific validation of both shamanism and NDEs.

We end this issue with gerontologist Bruce Horacek’s review of Parting Visions, by pediatrician Melvin Morse and writer Paul Perry, a far-reaching overview of death-related visions, their spiritual implications, and their healing potential.

Bruce Greyson, M.D.
Guest Editorial

The Amplification and Integration of Near-Death and Other Exceptional Human Experiences by the Larger Cultural Context: An Autobiographical Case

Rhea A. White

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ABSTRACT: Although I became a parapsychologist in part to help me understand the near-death experience (NDE) I had in 1952 as an undergraduate, it was not until 1990 that I began to integrate my NDE into my life. Doing so alerted me to the role the larger cultural context plays in regard to NDEs and other exceptional human experiences (EHEs). I propose not only that we need to draw on cultural resources to amplify the meaning of our exceptional human experiences, but that EHEs themselves carry the seeds of cultural change.

In 1952 I had a near-death experience (NDE), though that term, of course, would not be coined for many years to come. Initially it changed the course of my life drastically, and it continues to do so, especially since 1990 or so, when I finally made what I experienced
in the NDE the touchstone of my life, deciding to elaborate on it and
live from it as fully as possible before I came to my real death, when-
ever that may be.

I did not have a “full-blown” NDE, yet what I experienced when
I nearly died has influenced my life more than anything else. My
near-death experience occurred when I was a junior in college and
had driven my 1936 Ford from Penn State to Syracuse University
to pick up a friend whose car was being repaired. He was to be my
guest at a big weekend at Penn State. A terrible driving snowstorm
developed. Visibility was almost nil as we started back south. There
is a long hill as one leaves Syracuse, and try as I might, I could not
get to the top. I was not the only one. Both sides of the road were
lined with stranded cars. My friend asked me if I’d like him to try,
and although my father had told me never to let anyone else drive
my car, I answered fatefully, “Well, we’ll never get there with me
driving!” So we switched. My friend Stu was a very good dancer; he
had a light touch on the gas pedal. He got us over the hill and we
continued, going about 15 miles per hour. Then, out of the swirling
snow ahead came a coal truck. As it approached it began to skid
toward us.

The next thing I knew I was up in space, or so it seemed, as if
looking down on the Eastern seaboard, pinpointing State College, PA,
which steadily receded as I rose higher. As I relinquished my fixation
that we had to get there in time for the festivities, it dawned on me
that this being pulled away from Earth was what it was like to die.
Obviously not being able to do anything about it, I relaxed, as if
leaning back into space, and then I felt the “everlasting arms” en-
circling and cushioning me from behind. Then it was as if a voice
said to me, “Nothing that ever lived could possibly die,” as if by defi-
nition. I felt a sense of living stillness, peace, wonder, pure alive-
ness—and then I woke up on the hood of my car, in pain, unable to
move, with the sound of the metal of the car tinkling as it settled,
my head turned so that I could see cars creeping along the slippery
road with people inside craning their necks to look at us.

I called to Stu but got no answer. The truck driver, who as it turned
out had gone for help, returned, and an ambulance arrived eventu-
ally. As I was to learn later, Stu was killed instantly when the truck
totaled the car, entering the driver’s side. Perhaps it was the impact
of his body against mine that shielded me and pushed me up against
the roof and then out the windshield, which gave way in one piece.
I had 11 fractures and was in and out of a drugged state for days,
but when I was conscious, I could sense this singing stillness. It was what I had felt when I thought I was dying. It combined a sense of deep peace with a poised expectancy, as when a child wakes up on his or her birthday. And as the days went on, I could feel myself healing, my bones knitting. This was an exceptional experience in itself, because somehow I felt I was aware of this gentle fizz of healing energy like ginger ale in my bone cells. I did not actually feel I was in the cells or could “see” inside them as some people have reported being able to do (Murphy, 1992). It was more like an “as if” experience: my conception of what was happening could only be expressed in metaphors. But something new and real had entered my life, for it was never the same again.

I have already written about in some detail how my NDE itself influenced my life and career since it occurred more than 40 years ago (White, 1992, 1994a). Here I will show how writing the present article, which itself is an aftereffect of my NDE, was made possible only by my continual need to pursue its meaning. Although this small experience is itself quite complicated, it is only one of many experiences I could give to illustrate how each exceptional human experience (EHE) gives rise to many tendrils that, as the years pass, reach out and connect with many other EHEs, one’s own and those of others, all of which appear to be products of the same process and aspects of the same overarching and underlying pattern.

Because of my NDE, I became a parapsychologist in 1954. It was my first job, and it became my profession. I have spent my life trying to understand psi phenomena, the global term for extrasensory perception (ESP) and psychokinesis (PK), the main subject matter of parapsychology, because of the challenge it presents, but initially also because I felt the answer would open the door to a fuller understanding of what I experienced in my NDE. Paradoxically, although one area of parapsychology is the attempt to find empirical evidence that some aspect of the human personality survives death, I find that area one of the least interesting. I attribute this to my NDE-based conviction that there is no death, but also to the hypothesis that what survives is here, now, and always, and the best way to investigate survival is to expand and explore the limits, if any, of the living.

I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to tap the collective consciousness as much as possible regarding EHEs. It is not difficult to encounter life-depotentiating and disparaging words about them, but we must also seek out the life-potentiating narratives about them.
(see White, *in press*). Some of these experiences are so evanescent, fleeting, and ineffable that to incorporate them into your life you need to bring them "down to earth" and find points of connection here in your culture, as well as share them with other people; sharing them is also an essential component of integrating an NDE or other exceptional experience (White, 1993c, 1994b, 1994d, 1994e). We need language and terms in which to pinpoint and communicate what we have experienced—not only to others, but to ourselves. But often, before we can do that, we need to know of similar experiences of others and how they were able to incorporate and integrate them—or not.

Taking my NDE as an example, for many years I referred to it simply as "the accident"; I had no other way to depict this major event in my life. I even dated important occurrences in my life as having taken place before or after "the accident." But what I referred to by "the accident" was not my car being totaled or my 11 fractures, or even the awfulness of Stu dying because I consented to his driving the car, but to what I experienced when I was out of my body. But I didn't even have the language for that, so "the accident" was the best I could do. At least "the accident" itself was an event. It had been written up in the newspapers. I wasn't even sure myself that that intangible "something" I encountered out there seemingly in space was "real," even though I was still very aware of it, especially intuitively and viscerally. But as far as understanding its import for my life, you could say it was still suspended somewhere out there in space, waiting for me to find the words and concepts to connect and integrate it into my identity and my life.

Once I was into parapsychology and exposed to the literature, I learned about "out-of-body experiences," but I associated them with "astral travel" and adopted the parapsychological explanation that a person was not really "out" even when he or she brought back veridical information. It could have been obtained by extrasensory perception (ESP), as sometimes happens in dreams.

The first bit of cultural information that encouraged me in thinking that what I had experienced was not simply my imagination was a brief note in *Time* magazine ("Pleasures of dying," 1972). It was about Russell Noyes' research (1972; Noyes and Kletti, 1972) on subjective aspects of "dying," including resistance followed by surrender, dissociation from the body, a sense of peace, transcendence, and glimpses of seemingly profound truths. Here was a suggestion from the scientific literature that the current Western *zeitgeist*'s teachings about the nature of death might be wrong. Whole new possibilities were
opening up. This was different from investigations of life after death. This had to do with experiencing immortality while alive. Thanks to Noyes, my experience was validated for the first time as existing in its own right, not as an imagining, which in a sense enabled it to take on a life of its own independent from me.

I still referred to it as “the accident,” but the cultural context was soon to change that. In the meantime, I felt a singing inside, and laughter and joy, because my wondrous experience likely had a reality beyond myself with implications far beyond any I had previously guessed, not only for myself but for others—or, one could say, not only for others, but for me. For I belonged to a nebulous group of people who had experienced something similar.

Then, in 1975, Raymond Moody’s *Life After Life* appeared, adding a new word to the Western cultural consciousness: *near-death experience*. I still wasn’t certain that was what I had experienced, because mine did not fit the prototypical NDE Moody set forth. But at least mine was an echo of a near-death experience, which added to its verisimilitude.

Then, when the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) was founded and *Anabiosis*, the precursor of this Journal, was published, I joined right away. As *Vital Signs* appeared and the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* superseded *Anabiosis*, and the literature on NDEs began to burgeon, including books, chapters, and articles in other scholarly journals, I realized that NDEs covered a wide range of experience and it was likely that what happened during “the accident” was indeed a near-death experience. This received the “seal of approval,” as it were, when I responded to a call from Bruce Greyson to participate in his ongoing near-death research involving answering many questionnaires about one’s NDE over a period of time. Potential participants were asked to send an account of their experience, which I did. I was then invited to participate, and I began to refer to “the accident” as “my near-death experience,” because if a near-death researcher like Greyson considered that it qualified as an NDE for his research, then that must be what it was. I now knew I belonged to the growing group of people who had had NDEs. Thanks to IANDS, it was now easy for NDErs to learn more about NDEs and to compare their experience with those of others. Being able to name your specific EHE, being able to read or hear similar experiences of others, having your EHE the subject of serious research, and to have NDEs written about in such depth and so ex-
tensively, is of inestimable importance both to the experiencer and, potentially, to one's culture.

By means of recent cultural currents, particularly as expressed in scholarly journals, books, general interest magazines, and even the mass media, I became aware in the late 1980s that people were reporting many different kinds of life-changing experiences, some that fit the label "parapsychological" and many that did not, such as encounters with unidentified flying objects (UFOs), glossolalia, the "extraordinary sports experience" (Murphy and White, 1995), out-of-body experiences, even crop circles. I began to ask: "What's going on here? What is the meaning of such experiences for psi?" To answer the question, I felt I needed to look at the full spectrum of experiences from a generic viewpoint, not the usual single disciplinary approach, in which near-death researchers study NDEs, students of religion study mystical experiences, psychotherapists study transformative experiences that occur in therapy, parapsychologists study psychic experiences, and so on.

The first step in looking at these experiences generically was to coin a term that would encompass all of them, and I eventually arrived at exceptional human experience, for reasons I have explained elsewhere (White, 1990, 1992, in press). I felt a need for a term that would cover all the experiences that have been called nonordinary, unusual, anomalous, primal, and paranormal. I needed such a term because I wanted to look at the full range of experiences as a group, to see if some broad observations could be made about all or at least several of them. I did not feel the existing terms were adequate because they tended to emphasize the weirdness of such experiences and thus to encourage people to think that they themselves or other experiencers were weird as well.

These experiences, which I have placed in five broad categories of psychic experiences, mystical experiences, encounter-type experiences, death-related experiences, and experiences at the upper limits of what is generally considered "normal," or "exceptional normal experiences," are not ordinary, but they are among the most important experiences, as experiences, that one can have. Their import, I believe, is primarily subjective, even if they affect the outer world, as in poltergeist manifestations, or the body, as in stigmata. Some psychologists have studied what they call "exceptional" experiences, but by this they mean rare experiences, experiences that occur only once or a few times in a lifetime, and have a significant effect on the individual, such as graduating from college, getting married, getting
a job, earning a significant promotion, or becoming a parent. These experiences occur in connection with events that can be objectively verified. Usually the individual involved has willed that such experiences would occur and has conducted his or her life so that they would.

Exceptional human experiences, on the other hand, are spontaneous. They happen to you, usually taking you by surprise. Although they may be associated with places or events or people, the quality that makes them exceptional is very personal and subjective. They immediately confer upon the experiencer a sense of being singled out by the touch of an unseen hand (White, in press).

The second step was to try to study the various types of EHEs to see if any generalizations could be made. I have drawn up a preliminary list of 10 possibilities (White, 1993a). In an effort to explore the import of EHEs further, I have been working with my own experiences and those of others to amplify and expand on the implications of the experiences, as suggested by the experiences themselves. The tool we have been developing to do this is the EHE autobiography, in which people recall and record their lives solely in terms of their EHEs, trying to connect them to each other even though they may have occurred many years apart and under very different circumstances. This cannot be done in one sitting, because we have repressed most of our EHEs. It usually takes several weeks of delving into the past, retrieving experiences and then connecting them and amplifying their possible meanings (White, 1993b, 1994c, in press).

This has been very meaningful for me personally and for the individuals with whom I have worked. It has made me consider the role of the larger cultural context in dealing with EHEs: not only ways in which culture can augment EHEs but ways in which EHEs can inject new life, new symbols, and new insights into culture at large. This is the subject of the present article. In it I express some of the tentative ideas and insights I have had about EHEs, using, as always, my own NDE as a touchstone. I am especially interested in reactions from the readers of this Journal, for although I feel the ideas set forth are relevant to any type of EHE, NDEs seem to embody most fully the generalizations I am making about all EHEs.

I propose that an exceptional human experience takes place when the collective unconscious, or the Self we all are, meets the collective consciousness. This assumption is based on my experience and that of others (for example, Dhyan, 1993; Michele, 1993) and of the founders of most religions. Broadly, the term "collective consciousness"
could be defined as any observation, idea, impression, or aspiration of every human who has ever lived; these elements of collective consciousness are publicly available through various informal or public means of communication, such as speech, the written word, tape recordings, television and other forms of the mass media, art forms, motion pictures, and any form of electronic communication. Of course, no one living at any one time could possibly draw on all the resources available because of geographic, linguistic, economic, cultural, motivational, and other personal limitations. Our awareness of the collective consciousness of humankind is usually restricted to that which our own culture makes available to us and equips us to comprehend.

The prevailing worldview of a given culture largely determines the information sources readily available, but countercultural ideas and terms can be encountered as well. Theoretically, every culture has its primary worldview and its countercultural currents, but I have been exposed only to Western culture as mediated in the last half of the 20th century primarily in the Eastern United States, even when it comes to what I know about Eastern, South and Central American, East European, Far Eastern, and African cultures. Therefore my conception of exceptional human experience is very much tied to Western culture. It is very likely that it is not applicable to other cultures and other time periods even in the West, especially before the Europeans discovered the Western hemisphere. But given the worldview prevailing in Western culture today and the countercultural currents also circulating, the concept of exceptional human experience appears to be timely and relevant.

Modern Western culture, on the whole, is not hospitable to exceptional human experience, yet by their very nature, EHEs cannot be easily dismissed by those who have them, though many make a great effort to do so. They are "exceptional," in part, because by definition EHEs call "ordinary" reality into question. Additionally, EHEs themselves call for an explanation, as if they were a summons from the universe to the experiencers, requiring each one to give as faithful and full an account as possible of his or her unusual experience, and then to amplify upon its meaning as fully as possible—a process that may well involve a lifetime. It is likely that EHEs may be amplified and integrated indefinitely throughout the experiencer's life and even afterward, by others, as later in this paper I do with some experiences of Thomas Merton.
Second, because they originate in the collective unconscious, which is shared by all, I hypothesize that each one is potentially as relevant to other people as to the experiencer, though of course the feeling tone and emotional impact at second and third hand cannot be experienced the same way by others. But a lot depends on who tells the story. If a poet or dramatist or artist portrays it, its effect upon others can be profound. Even a mundane brown-paper-bag account can stir others simply because the content of the experience itself resonates deeply at the same unconscious level of the reader or listener as that from which it arose in the experiencer. But the relevance of such experiences to others is also affected by their cultural background.

It is cultural background, or my interpretation of what Pierre Bourdieu (1986) called “cultural capital,” that makes it possible for EHEs to be amplified and expanded. Depending on how much cultural capital, or exposure to the larger cultural context, one has, a seemingly endless number of connections can be made at the personal, social, and cultural levels. Even if the original experiencer is illiterate and does not possess a radio or television or any publication and is therefore greatly hampered in being able to amplify or elaborate on what happened, others can carry it forward—for themselves, for others, and even for the original experiencer. In our day, popular culture is much more open to the paranormal, and one is bound to have some exposure to it, although it is superficial. The interpretive level of EHEs has no limit, not only because it is potentially as wide and as deep as all the cultures of the world put together, but also, I propose, because exceptional human experiences are the means by which cultures expand and move forward (White, 1980, 1994e). Moreover, because EHEs are dynamic, they initiate a process of unfoldment for the experiencer or group that itself need not end, to the extent that the experiencer enters consciously into the process (White, 1994a, in press).

In this process, which necessarily takes a considerable period of time—certainly months and usually years—additional EHEs of the same or different types are likely to be experienced. This sets into motion a system of multiple connections, thus increasing the opportunities for connecting with other aspects of oneself, other people, and previously unperceived cultural contents. A spiral of growth is initiated, which ideally can expand throughout the individual’s lifetime, changing the person in the process, so that he or she becomes more process than person and is increasingly open to the collective
unconscious within and the collective consciousness without. As one expands inwardly in this way, one's own outer influence increases because, by means of the cultural expansion, one's possibilities of reaching others are increased. The net one casts is both larger and more finely meshed than what one had to work with in connection with the initial EHE that captured one's imagination and called for a reorientation of one's being.

In the course of following up on my own NDE, I became a student of Gerald Heard (White, 1984), who was a contemplative first, and then a science reporter, writer, and speaker. Heard (1950) wrote that human beings stand at the confluence of two infinities, the beyond that is within and the beyond that is without. Each "has the opportunity to become a reciprocating value, a hyphen, a two-flow duct between the invisible potentiality and visible actuality, 'a swinging wicket set between/The Seen and the Unseen'" (Heard, 1950, p. 57). We must become conscious of this and experience its reality, for it is our best chance to enrich our own lives and those of others with whom we come in contact and to whom we relate, and the culture into which we were born, and beyond that, other cultures and even the Earth itself. But again, this is a vast reciprocal process, and it is not separate from us: we are the "swinging wicket"—we are the process.

As is the case with many people, all my life the Earth has sung to me, quickened me to life, cradled me. In my youth, to awake to a glimpse of blue sky and evergreen outside my window, to hear the song of a phoebe or a Baltimore oriole, made me eager to start a new day simply to be alive in the midst of such glory and wonder. I was never depressed or disappointed for long by events in my personal life because the sounds and smells and sights of Earth would call me back to joy. I didn't think about it. It was an unconscious process.

In my middle years, having discovered that the "self" that felt joy was not the only component of my being, in the travail of trying to integrate other aspects of myself, I was not open to or even denied myself the experience of joy, if it would shut the door on some much less happy aspect of myself. Now, in my senior years, secure in the living knowledge that I and the Earth, and all that is of it, are one, I can again be buoyed up by its call, at the same time that my days are darkened by the shadow of destruction that hangs over us all, a shadow that we ourselves have lowered over our world. Because we are one, we are all guilty. But in our oneness also lies our
strength, and what we have wrought we can also "rent asunder" (I pray). With the help of grace, may it be so. And the vehicle by which grace touches us is exceptional human experience.

Thanks to my NDE, I was initiated into a journey of consciously becoming aware of who we all are and why we are here, poised between the two infinities. There is no end to either one, and ultimately, they are the same. What fun it is to become conscious through all the layers of the onion self we are! What joy it is to meet ourselves in our culture, to find ourselves reflected in new ways, opening new vistas. The unconscious awareness of the wonder of being alive is awesome in itself, but becoming personally and, more importantly, culturally aware is so much more; one learns the meaning of "and all the morning stars sang together" (Job 38:7). The aim of life, it seems to me, is to meet ourselves everywhere we go in the world, and to find the world everywhere we go in ourselves. I certainly have not attained this state, but it is an endless and infinitely wonderful project in which to be engaged!

When I began many years ago there was myself "in here" and there was the world "out there," and there was not a lot of "between the two." Since that time I have become "oned" with much of what is in the world and in other people. But there can never be an end because there is no end to growth once one enters the dynamics of the spiral that an EHE, consciously cooperated with, can initiate.

Although the individual is the vehicle in which and by which the process unfolds, it is culture that carries it forward. In the past, humans carried out and experienced this process of "oneing" by becoming immersed in a very specialized cultural groove, as in the monastic life or an artistic calling. The term "oned" is probably most often associated with the anonymous author of the 14th-century mystical text, The Cloud of Unknowing (1948), who wrote that contemplation is the process by "which a soul is oned with God" (p. 1). Even within the particular cultural path each religious sect provides, increased inner experience tends to broaden the cultural end (the macrocosm) as an individual goes further within (the microcosm). Thus, Merton, for example, sought the silence of the Trappists in the cloister at Gethsemani in Tennessee. Later, at age 43, he realized, in what was an exceptional human experience, his oneness with humanity and with the world he had "left." He was standing on a street corner in Louisville, idly "people watching," when, as William Shannon (1992) described it, he
was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that he loved these people and that they belonged to him and he to them. This experience shattered the notion of a separate holy existence. . . . He thrilled to the glory of being quite simply a member of the human race, not separate from others, but at one with all men and women. He writes that the experience “was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.”

In experiencing his solidarity with all those people who did not belong to his monastic family, he experienced what he had said many times, namely, that in some mysterious way his solitude belonged to them as much as to him. “I have responsibilities for it in their regard, not just in my own. I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone they are not ‘they,’ but my own self. There are no strangers!” (p. 191)

In fact, he went within himself so far that in the last part of his life he was much more catholic than Catholic, and recognized that what he had found through his Catholic culture could be found in other world religions, especially Buddhism. On his pilgrimage to Asia, toward the end of which he would die, he had a culminating vision that not only “oned” him with all religions and all cultures, but took him beyond the reach of culture; but note that it was the culture he had necessarily imbibed that allowed him to reach that pinnacle and depth, both inside and outside himself, at the Buddhist shrine of Polonnaruwa in Kandy. There he confronted the great statues of the Buddha, and

the silence of their extraordinary faces. . . . Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, projecting nothing, the peace . . . that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything—without refutation—without establishing some other argument. (Merton, 1973, p. 233)

He wrote that this experience knocked him over, that as he looked at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves became evident and obvious. The queer evidence of the reclining figure. . . . The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no “mystery.” All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. (Merton, 1973, pp. 233-234)
For him (and to an extent for me, and I hope for any reader of his words as well), this was a major exceptional human experience. Of it he wrote:

I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. . . . I know I have seen what I was obscurely looking for. (Merton, 1973, p. 234)

This experience of Merton's was occasioned by his purposeful visit to a religious shrine, but often EHEs of profound inner significance are triggered spontaneously by objective events, some of which are made possible by our expanding technology. An excellent example of this is the overview effect induced in many astronauts as a result of viewing the Earth from outer space. Frank White coined the term "overview effect" for this particular type of EHE and has written a book about it by that title (White, 1987). He quoted many examples, including that of astronaut Russell Schweickert, who had a transforming experience during his orbital flight, followed by a second experience that occurred during a mission outside his space vehicle. He had recognized his identity with Earth while viewing it from within his space vehicle. When he was working outside the vehicle, he had the following unexpected experience:

You're no longer inside something with a window, looking out at a picture. Now you're out there and there are no frames, there are no limits, there are no boundaries. . . . And there's not a sound. There's a silence the depth of which you've never experienced before, and that silence contrasts so markedly with the scenery you're seeing and the speed with which you know you're moving. (White, 1987, p. 12)

Every time I read the foregoing passage, I am transported back to my NDE: being "out there" with no frames, no limits, no boundaries, and the depth of the silence. I have been "hit" by a similar silence twice that I can recall. These experiences were probably so striking and memorable because they were reminiscent of my NDE. One occurred in 1954, when I stood on the brink of the Grand Canyon. The view, of course, was awesome. But what struck me most was the silence, which was almost palpable. It instantly recalled me to the ambiance of my NDE. The second was starting down a stairway built against a high cliff above Long Island Sound. A few steps down, with the cliffside behind to screen out sounds from above, I was struck almost physically by the silence I encountered in front
of me. Looking down at the water sliding silently below, I was back again in the atmosphere of my NDE. I did not want to leave, or even move. I just wanted to stand there, transfixed by that magnificent silence that echoed a still deeper silence, one deep within us all.

Schweickert continued:

You know very well at that moment, and it comes through to you so powerfully that you're the sensing element for man. You look down and see the surface of that globe that you've lived on all this time, and you know all those people down there and they are like you, they are you—and somehow you represent them. . . .

And when you come back there's a difference in the world now. There's a difference in that relationship between you and that planet and you and all those other forms of life on that planet, because you've had that kind of experience. It's a difference and it's so precious. And all through this I've used the word you because it's not me, it's not Dave Scott, it's not Dick Gordon, Pete Conrad, John Glenn—it's you, it's we.

It's Life that's had that experience. (White, 1987, pp. 12-13)

Another astronaut, Jeff Hoffman, cited an unidentified poem by a mountain climber that depicts the long-term influence of the overview effect, but one could say the same for any EHE:

You cannot stay on the summit forever; you have to come down again. So why bother . . . ? Just this: What is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above.

One climbs, one sees; one descends, one sees no longer, but one has seen. There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When we can no longer see, we can at least still know. (White, 1987, p. 24)

It is my thesis that the noetic experience of the mountaineers, the astronauts, the NDErs—in fact, all exceptional human experiencers—is not simply theirs to recall; it is everyone's, and not in a secondary sense. Once one human has experienced it in the depths of his or her being, we have all experienced it, and not only humans, but life itself, as Schweickert so movingly expressed it, and even beyond that, I believe, Earth itself.

I believe at one time or another everyone has an exceptional experience, his or her own unique inscape, a term first used by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1868/1959, p. 129) for each person's unique "intake" of that depth and height that is the Oneness of all. But even if they dismiss it, forget it, fear it, or even actively reject it, it is theirs nonetheless, but not just theirs. Theirs was
the lens especially formed to capture that particular vision, but the import belongs to all. This includes the "overview effect" as well. If, for whatever reason, we have no insight of our own to sustain us, we can feed off those of others, because even as ours is theirs, theirs is ours.

I think we are on the brink, in this "global village" of ours, of being able to find projects of transcendence (White, 1992) in the midst of our very secular lives, and we can even engage in multiple projects. A project of transcendence is a long-term discipline or activity, such as a sport or other recreational challenge, a learning project, a volunteer activity, a therapeutic endeavor, or even one's vocation or regular job, that requires dedication, some form of ritual, and opportunities for transcendence, for going within or without, beyond one's previous limits. Any such project will provide many occasions when we will be able to go further inside/outside, making it possible for us to connect further, deeper, and higher with ourselves and with other aspects of culture and our world. As our vocabularies and symbol systems expand, so will we. As we meet ourselves in more "others," we will embrace more of the world. And each project of transcendence starts with an exceptional human experience. Each EHE is a key given to us that opens the door to the place in ourselves where we are consciously aware that the beyond that is within and the beyond that is without are the same.

To become conscious, we need the larger cultural surround or context. We need to know what others feel, say, think, and do, and what they have felt, said, thought, and done throughout the ages. In a sense it is like getting in touch with one's own past, one's own present, and then, as much as possible, at least the drift of one's future. An EHE occurs spontaneously, by definition. But, once it does, one begins the work of personal, social, and cultural integration of that experience. Much effort has been expended in the past to induce EHEs consciously, especially those of the mystical and psychical type, by drugs, sensory isolation, hypnosis, meditation, yoga, the arts, and various forms of body work and psychotherapy. In fact, I think it is spontaneous occurrences of such experiences that motivate people to climb mountains, sail singlehandedly around the world, form objects out of clay and rock, perform delicate intricate operations, and play professional basketball. These are all projects of transcendence, initiated by EHEs and aimed, in part, at experiencing additional EHEs.

By looking reflexively at my act of writing this paper, I can show how it reflects the process I am trying to describe: the manner in
which an EHE can engender a ripple effect both within and without, and how in the process itself these two aspects of ourselves recognize their oneness in a manner that is both fed by and amplifies cultural vignettes, in the way a bird weaves its nest out of many different materials.

It is of great interest to me that, whereas I see much promise in the breakdown of overarching cultural paradigms, both religious and scientific, as setting the stage for major cultural expansions, in which individual indigenous groups and sects discover the center we all share by pushing their uniqueness as far as it will go, Australian sociologist Jack Schumaker (1990) saw the weakening of traditional religious views as a symptom of a faulty cultural system, which fosters mental illness. He held that "conventional religious paranormal beliefs have always been the most effective method for health-giving reality distortion," but "the present flood of unbelievable nonreligious beliefs” is “contributing to the health crisis of our times” (p. 6).

On the contrary, I suggest that the decline of traditional religious paranormal belief has rearranged the stage so that the sacred can be encountered any- and everywhere. Sacred space need no longer be set apart from the secular: it is everywhere. Global communication makes it easier than it has ever been to be able to incorporate aspects of many cultures into the design of one's personal belief system, which may contain both religious and traditionally nonreligious elements, all of them operating in the interest of a meaningful, connected life for the individual.

The process requires an individual, an EHE, and a degree of exposure to the collective consciousness. Given those ingredients, that individual's life can be symbolized as a pump that taps a well that will generate meaning not only for that person but for at least several other people with whom that person will come in contact throughout his or her life, and perhaps even beyond that to strangers, even as Merton has touched me, though he died more than 25 years ago.

That is where culture comes in. In a sense, it is not so much that the original EHE, even an NDE, is important in itself; rather, it is what one does with it, how one weaves it into one's life (White, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1994d, in press). I suggest that each in its own way is a call to enter an inner world. Once we are touched by one of these experiences, there is much that we can do in response to the call, but much of it is internal work. It will not be obvious to others. To the persons involved, it may seem like they are chasing a chimera, a mere ghost of a presence. But if they persist
in trying to understand and follow up on the import of the experience, their lives will gradually be transformed. They will find, in Merton's felicitous phrase, what they had been "obscurely looking for." In fact, I suggest that what they have found, each in his or her unique way, is the new paradigm so many people, especially scientists, are seeking. I have called it the "experiential paradigm" (White, 1995), because you have to experience it before you can "know" it.

Psychic and mystical experiences are considered impractical, even by those who take them seriously, but I do not agree. I think they are among the most important experiences one can have, with implications and possible aftereffects that are planetwide in their significance. For if one looks at the cultural, as well as the personal and interpersonal, aftereffects in those cases where a person has followed the summons inherent in his or her EHE, one discovers that as understanding and identification grow, many invisible webs of connection are formed. Connections are forged within the self, which result in a better integrated personality. Connections are made effortlessly with other people. And perhaps most importantly, a profound sense of connection to all other forms of life is experienced, and beyond that, with life itself. Nor does it stop with animals and plants. A sense of unity is also experienced with the inanimate world, and beyond that, with the universe at large. With some EHEs, especially the mystical ones, the unitive sense comes with the initial experience. In the case of others, a process is initiated that will culminate in such experiences, if the individual follows up on the initiatory experience.

Why is this practical? It is practical because EHEs summon us to become more than we thought we were, more than mainstream culture generally teaches us that we can be, and as our sense of our self is transformed, so is our view of others and even of the planet. EHEs are potentially life-changing experiences. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke, writing of one such experience, indicated that its unspoken import was: "You must change your life" (1980, p. 245). Instead of following one's peers and living by the streetwise precepts of today's social world, one listens to another voice, an inner one that speaks very softly, so right away one of the first things one must do is set aside some quiet time simply to listen, intent on being led forth to the next step.

There are several steps one can take in response to an EHE, but here I want to emphasize the cultural approach. For example, in addition to meditating on the experience, one can seek out and speak
to others who have had similar experiences, or one can seek guidance from a person who is a teacher or mentor. But it is not easy to locate fellow experiencers or competent teachers, although NDErs are a special case, thanks to the existence of IANDS. But if a special group devoted to the type of EHE you have had does not exist, I have a notion that simply to search the yellow pages to find someone or to use other normal, deliberate ways is not what is called for here. I am mindful of the adage, "When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear."

An EHE is a call to get yourself ready. There are plenty of things you can still do, but trying willfully to make something happen is not one of them. Inner guidance, as well as seemingly magical guidance coming from "outside," are what you should be alert to. But even when strange synchronicities occur or you have additional exceptional experiences, caution is in order. You cannot simply leap off the deep end, and yet eventually, that is precisely what you must do. But it has to be spontaneous, as spontaneous and outside your ego's willing as was the original call.

One way of seeking out others who have had similar experiences or learning from those who are more advanced than oneself is to take what I am calling the cultural approach. Simply put, it consists of sampling and possibly even devouring, if you are moved to do so, everything in your own culture—and even stepping beyond it to other cultures—that seems to speak to your own experience. Never mind if you do not know any person you can talk to. Let the people who have communicated precisely for one such as you come into your life. The American Heritage Dictionary (1982) gives this definition of culture: "The arts, beliefs, customs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought created by a people or group of a particular period of time." We are moving today into a global, multicultural world that is composed of hundreds of indigenous cultures. Spurred on by inventions in electronics and communications, we have access, relatively inexpensively, to the world's cultural resources. Audiotapes, videotapes, computer bulletin boards, and now the World Wide Web, as well as literature, records, museums, movies, theater, art, and crafts make available to us the guidance of the ages regarding exceptional human experience. I had no fellow experiencer to talk to in my youth, but I had Heard, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Evelyn Underhill, and Carl Jung. I hate to think what my life would be had I not had them; but I did, and that made all the difference.
Once you find one author or artist who speaks to your condition, if you follow up on other authors or artists referred to by the first one, gradually you will become aware of a network that has developed of like-minded persons. Eventually there will be variations expressed or you will have new experiences that open new doors. In my own case, so many authors new to me are writing books today that I review 120 a year in the journal I publish, which is entitled Exceptional Human Experience. There are at least 200 more books that come to my attention that I order, and at least 300 more that I learn about but do not succeed in obtaining, for lack of time, energy, or money. I know many more exist beyond that, but I rest in the thought that I will read what I need and that the sample I am able to obtain and digest connects me nonetheless with those I am unable to obtain. I cannot obtain everything; in the meantime, what I have fills all the time, energy, and inner space I have, and continually leads me inward/outward, upward/downward, backward/forward in a wondrous dance of life and self.

We hear much talk of the global networks that exist in the physical world. I think they can be matched by global networks within each individual that connect and unite each of us with everyone and everything fully as much as the global networks of the outer world. And the doors to these networks within us are opened by our exceptional human experiences. Although in our prehistory humans may actually have been conscious of this unity, it has long since been lost with the opening of the proverbial Pandora's box and the cacophony created by the development of many nationalities and cultures. But the highest promise of the 21st century lies not only along the Information Highway, but the exceptional internal byways within each one of us. This is not to belittle the tremendous potential of the Internet, which not only can connect each individual to the world, but also has great potential to enable people, through virtual reality, to have exceptional human experiences and to communicate about their experiences not just locally but planetwide. There are now sufficient cultural assets available to enable people to understand and build on their own unique and individual exceptional human experiences. Cultural amplification of our EHEs will enable us to become consciously aware of our connection to everything else. Here is how I envisage it.

To take myself as an example, although I had my NDE in 1952, I could not have written this paper even a year ago, because I had not yet read about the specific EHEs of the space explorers, with
the exception of Edgar Mitchell's (1974) account. I had not read about Merton's two experiences. I found out about the “overview effect” because of an article I abstracted for *Exceptional Human Experience*, which for me serves as one means of following up on the ripple effect of my own EHEs. I found out about Merton's Polonnaruwa experience because I shared my experiences with Loretta Kelleher, a fellow librarian and a Merton devotee, who brought his experience to my attention. In following up on that experience of Merton's, I came across the account of his Louisville experience. Heard’s words have echoed through my life since I had the great fortune to attend his lectures in the early 1950s, when I first began to try to understand the meaning of my near-death and related mystical experiences. In that same period of search I read *The Cloud of Unknowing* (1948), and about the process of “oneing.”

In following up on my NDE, for many years Heard’s writings, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (1948), and hundreds of other related books I read were relegated to only one room of my cultural house. My aim was to reconcile the wisdom and experience they contained with my too-stubborn daily life and that of others, but I was involved in science, where meaning, it seems, must everlastingly wait for data to pile up and finally squeak. By 1990, my culture came to the rescue through feminist, postmodern, hermeneutic, narrative, and heuristic approaches outside my chosen field of parapsychology. At last I had found what I had been “obscurely looking for.” I found these to be such abundant approaches to meaning that I stopped waiting outside the mouse hole and jumped into what I feel will one day be the mainstream of Western culture, if it is not already. In entering the science of parapsychology, my aim had been to be on the growing edge of Western thought. When I discovered that edge not only was not in parapsychology but was burgeoning elsewhere, I had no choice but to follow.

So here we have one little individual following up on one nondescript NDE—with considerable verve and energy, to be sure—but I believe that drive and energy had their origin in the NDE itself, and that it is a component of any EHE. Each one contains the energy and the direction needed to carry it forward and allow it to expand, but one must consciously cooperate with the process.

It is self-feeding if one aims to move forward. If one fails at least to try to follow up, the energy seeps away and nothing will happen. The sweet sap may even turn to vinegar and affect the experiencer’s life in a negative way. Your life cannot be changed, because you have
not given your consent. The concept of exceptional human experience for me serves as the bridge between the two infinities, between my most exceptional personal internal experiences and the vast reaches of both environment and culture, not only in the present but also in the past. In my NDE I was oned with life and with the sacred. By finally basing my life on it, I am oned with people, the environment, the Earth itself. If all this can happen to me, it can happen to anyone.

Implicit in each EHE is the special key to the hidden door opening on the best possible life for each one of us. If we don't turn the key and go through the door, our lives will be mostly humdrum and boring. How not? If we are not living with our full selves, if our lives are not imbued with meaning that connects us to life, to others, to our world, then what we are doing is chasing a shadow, not feeding on substance—because in reality we are connected, we will have what we need if we will only pay attention to our own unique message as it is expressed through our EHEs. But it is not a one-way street. One can go within to find the place that embraces the outer world, as Merton did, or one can go without, and through the transformational capacity of an EHE, find that the outer world is mirrored within, which is what happened with the astronauts, the mountain climbers, and to me in a mystical experience during contemplation, which was initiated as an aftereffect of my NDE. Indeed, I regard it as the fulfillment of my NDE, which was not full-blown. The knowledge many NDErs come back with, in my case, had to be induced by undertaking intense spiritual discipline. But it all started with my NDE.

I think that as a species we no longer need to turn to religion as such to engage in a project of transcendence. Anywhere we are moved to be or to go will do as well, if not better, because one need not adhere to the tenets of a specific religious text. We can induce and develop and expand ourselves inwardly/outwardly simply by heeding the experiences life gives us; and then by actively seeking cultural metaphors and symbols to inform and eventually transform them, we will be adding our individual increment to culture at large, that is, to the collective consciousness of our time and place. However, every religion in essence is also a project of transcendence that may answer an individual's needs. But religions are no longer the only approach to the sacred, even though they will likely remain prototypical for some time to come. All religions also provide a prime cultural source of insight and wisdom that we can draw on in seeking
the meaning of our exceptional experiences. Spending time in cathedrals, mosques, and other traditionally holy places is likely to induce the state of consciousness that can produce key insights that would be more difficult to have in the bustle of a city. Wilderness—even being in the presence of a favorite tree or rock or animal—can also facilitate awareness and deepen consciousness.

The point is that we are all called to inscendence/transcendence, to become more than we are by interacting with and joining the world inside with the world outside. The term "inscendence" was used by Father Thomas Berry (1988/1990) as a complement to "transcendence": inscendence is the experience of going beyond previous subjective limits inwardly, whereas transcendence is the experience of going beyond previous subjective limits outwardly. The sacred is where one meets it, and that can be anywhere. That meeting is an exceptional human experience, and that experience can lead to one's own project, a project that will serve as a means by which the individual uses social relations and culture to amplify his or her experience and, ultimately, him- or herself, and in so doing, to enrich those relationships and that culture in return. The concept is not new; in ancient times, for example, it was called lila, the divine play, or the divine dance of Shiva.

What is different in our day is that this dance of the two infinities can occur on a global scale: the whole world can become conscious of its oneness, with each individual, social group, and culture working through its native ways to find that which we all are, all of us knowing it individually and together. If we don't dance, there may be no more beyond that is without for us, and we will lose the opportunity that has been building here on Earth since the first life forms were spawned. In one way or another, life reaches all of us with moments of exceptional experience. Whether we deny, repress, revile, or build on them is the most important personal—and cultural—choice we will ever have to make.

References

Near-Death Experiences, Shamanism, and the Scientific Method

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ABSTRACT: The first 20 years of near-death studies have thoroughly documented the existence of this phenomenon. The field of near-death studies appears to be evolving from a purely academic one to include an applied, clinical component. I discuss the overlap between shamanism and near-death experiences (NDEs) and suggest that the study of shamanism would be helpful in more fully understanding this phenomena and beginning the development of an applied methodology. Although it may be difficult to verify subjective accounts of NDEs and shamanic journeys, from a clinical standpoint it may not be necessary to do so in order to develop a technique that passes the test of scientific scrutiny.

Near-death experiences (NDEs) may be able to claim status as the most thoroughly researched spiritual, mystical, transpersonal experience ever studied by modern Western scientists. Along with numerous articles in different scientific journals, the field of near-death studies has produced its own journal, now in its 16th volume, a number of books of personal accounts (Brinkley and Perry, 1994; Eadie and Taylor, 1993; Harris and Bascom, 1990; Ritchie, 1991; Ritchie and Sherrill, 1978), anecdotal accounts (Atwater, 1988, 1994; Moody, 1975, 1977; Moody and Perry, 1988; Morse and Perry, 1990, 1992; Sharp, 1995; Sutherland, 1992, 1993), controlled studies (Grey, 1985; Ring 1980, 1984, 1992; Sabom 1982), surveys (Gallup and Proctor, 1982); theoretical discussions (Grosso, 1985; Lorimer, 1990); edited volumes (Greyson and Flynn 1984; Lundahl 1982) and historical reviews of similar experiences (Couliano, 1991; Platthy, 1992; Zaleski,
More than 20 years after Raymond Moody (1975) first coined the term “near-death experience,” researchers have now documented tens of thousands of these episodes, analyzed their components, and catalogued their aftereffects. All this led Moody to write recently that he was now aware that “the near death experience is an established fact in our culture” (in Weiss, 1992, pp. 13-14). He went on to write:

More and more, ordinary people are becoming comfortable talking about their visions and in exchanging information about various techniques for inducing or facilitating them. . . . I am fairly confident that within the next few years this research will proceed to the point at which profound experiences that can at least be called “psychic” and which may well be called “spiritual” can be readily facilitated in psychologically normal individuals. (Weiss, 1992, p. 13, italics added)

Although the first 20 years of near-death studies have been largely academic, if Moody is correct, a shift is now occurring to include an applied, clinical approach, at least in some quarters. Moody’s own research into facilitated visionary encounters (Moody, 1993; Moody and Perry, 1993) represents the first applied methodology to emerge from the field of near-death studies. Moody (1995) has also recently spoken about what he refers to as “empathic near-death experiences,” experiences often reported by a relative of someone who is dying, during which the person actually enters, to some degree, into the experience with the dying individual. In a recent paper, I (Green, 1995) suggested that the development of lucid dreaming may be another technique of replicating components similar to those known to occur during NDEs. Michael Grosso (1995) has recently said that he now advocates what he refers to as “taking the shamanic turn”: “We have to go there, . . . in other words, to begin to explore the other world now.” Moreover, he said that this process has already begun and cited Stanislaw Grof’s and Moody’s work as evidence of this.

NDEs have been linked with a number of ancient traditions (Becker, 1984; Couliano, 1991; Greyson, 1993; Grosso, 1985; Moody, 1993; Moody and Perry, 1993; Platthy, 1993; Ring 1984; Rinpoche, 1992; Zaleski, 1987), many of which were not only religious or philosophical systems, but actual methods of direct spiritual experience. For instance, Grosso (1985) has argued that the ancient Greek and Egyptian initiation rituals were actually highly developed methods of inducing NDEs in young priests-in-training. John White (1995) has discussed the belief that the original form of baptism, full body immersion, was one in which the initiate was held under water until
near drowning, thereby inducing a near-death experience. However, nowhere is the connection between NDEs and ancient traditions clearer than in the oldest of all spiritual traditions, shamanism. The purpose of this paper is to examine more closely the connection between shamanic experiences and NDEs, to suggest that NDErs would both benefit from, and be excellent candidates for, further training in shamanism, and to argue that by incorporating shamanism, the field of near-death studies could develop an applied methodology that would pass scientific scrutiny.

The Overlap Between NDEs and Shamanism

While shamanic practitioners have been quick to recognize and discuss the phenomenological overlap between NDEs and shamanism (Halifax, 1990; Harner, 1980; Harner and Doore, 1987; Ingerman, 1991; Kalweit, 1984, 1987; Peters, 1990; Walsh, 1990), researchers and writers in the area of near-death studies appear to have been less aware, or at least have written less about, this connection. The one exception is Kenneth Ring (1990, 1989) who has written about the overlap between NDEs and the shamanic journey. Ring wrote:

By coming close to death, the NDEer has inadvertently and involuntarily been initiated into a shamanic journey. According to this view, then, the NDEers are modern shamans, and the NDE itself may be understood to be a classic form of shamanic initiation. In summary, the NDE is, in its form and dynamics, essentially a shamanic experience—whether the NDEer realizes it or not. (1990, p. 208)

Ring has also commented on the connection between the realm entered by NDErs and shamans, as well as the accessibility of that realm:

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

Too often in the past, the NDEr not only failed to realize that he or she has had a shamanic experience, but may have never heard of shamanism. Regardless, shamans would agree with Ring that an
NDE is a classic form of shamanic initiation (Halifax, 1990; Ingerman, 1991; Peters, 1990). Although shamanic initiations take many different forms, and not all are associated with a close brush with death, the literature is replete with examples of shamans who began their vocation following an NDE.

However, students and practitioners of shamanism would be quick to point out that having an NDE does not, by itself, grant someone the status of being a shaman, a point Ring acknowledged in a footnote. While the NDER has entered the same realm as the shaman, he or she did so only once, and does not always have the ability to repeat the experience. In contrast, the shaman has become, in Mircea Eliade's words, a "master of ecstasy" (1964, p. 4), one who is adept at consciously moving between the planes of existence at will and for a specific purpose. Following the shaman's initial contact with this realm, he or she becomes an apprentice to a master shaman. In shamanic cultures, the young initiate is then slowly taught all of the techniques that comprise the art of shamanism. Only then does the individual begin to practice his or her craft within the community. The final status of shaman is conferred upon them by members of their community based on their performance.

Although there are a number of different types of shamanic practitioners, an individual is generally not considered a shaman unless he or she engages in shamanic journeys, during which the shaman leaves the physical body and enters into the shamanic realm. Anthropologist and practicing shaman Michael Harner commented on the similarity between the shamanic journey and NDEs:

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

A person who has had an NDE, until recently, has had nowhere to turn in order to understand and begin to integrate his or her experience. Prior to Moody and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's work these experiences were largely dismissed or, worse, pathologized. Despite the intense interest in NDEs throughout the past two decades, there continues to be no formal method of integrating and understanding these experiences.
I believe that by studying shamanism, and incorporating it into our knowledge of NDEs, we will add important insights into our understanding of this phenomenon. First, individuals who have had deep NDEs may be able to integrate their experience more quickly by studying and practicing shamanic techniques. Many NDErs report problems following their experience, not the least of which is an intense desire to return to the state they found themselves in during their NDE. By learning the art of shamanic journeying, they are actually able to enter this state consciously, repeatedly, and at will. For example, Sandra Ingerman has told me in a personal communication that during her NDE she found herself in a garden-like area of preternatural beauty, which is often described by NDErs. She reported that she can return to that garden at will during a shamanic journey by simply holding an intention to do so; however, she stated that the wonderful sense of peace and calmness that was one aspect of her NDE is not present during her shamanic journeys. Many NDErs also return from their experience with an intense desire to help others. By developing the skill of shamanic journeying, NDErs could become shamanic healers. It behooves us, then, as students of NDEs, to take a closer look at the ancient art of shamanism.

Shamanism

Shamanism is an ancient tradition of healing believed to be at least 20,000 to 30,000 years old (Eliade, 1964; Harner, 1980; Walsh, 1990). Although almost completely suppressed in most Western cultures, shamanism has been continuously practiced, in one form or another, in many tribal and preliterate cultures throughout the world. Despite differences in other aspects of culture, as well as vast geographical and time differences, many of the basic practices, techniques, and beliefs that comprise shamanism are amazingly similar crossculturally (Harner, 1980; Walsh, 1990). This similarity led Roger Walsh to suggest that spontaneous NDEs, out-of-body experiences, and lucid dreams may have been the inspiration for consciously induced shamanic journeys:

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

The master shaman is a medicine man, a soul doctor, who has acquired a great deal of information about ancient techniques of healing a variety of physical, psychological, and spiritual problems. Through their long apprenticeship, shamans master a number of ancient arts of healing, which they use in maintaining the well-being and health of members of their community. And although there are a number of different techniques, central to all shamanic activity is the "shamanic journey."

The Shamanic Journey

During a shamanic journey, the shaman enters into an altered state of consciousness, referred to by Harner (1980, p. xvi) as the Shamanic State of Consciousness (SSC), and wills himself or herself to have an out-of-body experience (OBE). There are a number of different methods of achieving this state, but the one most frequently used is prolonged drumming. Once having achieved the OBE, the shaman enters into a nonordinary reality and travels to one of the three realms for a specific purpose.

Shamanic cosmology postulates three different, but interpenetrating realms of existence: the Middle World, which corresponds roughly to physical reality; the Upper World; and the Lower World. These realms are believed to be a real, although nonordinary reality, rather than simply mental constructions or metaphors for psychological states. The shaman enters into an altered state of conscious, thus using his mind to “gain access, to pass through a door into another reality that exists independently of that mind” (Harner and Doore, 1987, p. 4). Shamans believe that these worlds are populated by spirits that are accessible to people at death or in an altered state of consciousness. The shaman actively enters into the world of spirits and interacts with them, enlisting their aid and instruction in how to help care for the lives of the people to whom they minister. The shaman is said to control the spirits, at least in the sense that he or she has an ongoing relationship in which these spirits help and participate.
Through repeated journeys, the shaman becomes familiar with both the geography and the inhabitants of these different realms. While doing so, he or she enlists the aid of helping spirits, often in the form of animals, who assist the shaman in learning the various methods of curing illnesses, disorders, or diseases. These helping spirits are called power animals. The shaman will also acquire a spirit teacher, often referred to as a tutelary spirit, who acts as a teacher during his or her journeys. From the shamanic perspective all things are thought to be endowed with spirit; animals, plants, even minerals possess a spiritual essence, and it is the shaman who has the ability to communicate directly with these spiritual entities.

Shamanic View of Illness

In the shaman's view, many illnesses are the result of being literally dis-spirited; either the person's spirit has left the body and not returned, or the individual has lost the aid of one of his or her helping spirits. In either case, the shaman will undertake a shamanic journey in order to attempt to find and bring back the missing spirit. If the shaman is successful, the patient should then be relieved of symptoms and restored to health.

The shaman is also a psychopomp, a conductor of souls between this world and the world of the dead. Shamans believe that people who have recently died, especially under sudden circumstances, are often confused and disoriented. The shaman enters a trance state, travels into nonordinary reality, finds the wandering soul, and assists in directing it to where it can find help.

The shaman is also a seer (see-er), one who engages in divination to see into the future in order to help those in his or her community. This is often done with the help of a quartz crystal. The shaman will stare into the quartz while focusing his or her intention on a particular question and will “see” the answer within the rock. Dreams also play a major part in shamanic activities. The shaman believes that there are two different types of dreams: ordinary dreams and nonordinary dreams, which are also known as “big dreams.” A “big dream” is described as a “dream that is so vivid that it is like being awake, an unusually powerful dream” (Harner, 1980, p. 127).

Shamanism is, then, basically an applied therapeutic methodology. It is, however, a methodology based on a different, expanded view of
reality and dependent upon the practitioner’s ability to enter into an altered state of consciousness and successfully execute a particular task. And one thing is clear: people who have had deep NDEs are excellent candidates for further training in shamanism. While many people who seek out training in shamanism undergo difficult, even dangerous initiations, in the case of NDErs, the worst has already happened! NDErs have died, been to the other side, and returned. And they often return expressing a deep desire to enter into the helping professions. What better way to express this than by building on their experience and training to become a shaman, training that now is available in the Western world.

The Work of Michael Harner

Harner is an anthropologist by training who, since the death of Eliade, has been widely recognized as the leading authority in the world on shamanism. Harner is more than an armchair authority on the subject, having himself been initiated into shamanism while conducting field work among the Conibo Indians in the upper Amazon. He is also a practicing shaman and teacher of shamanism. It is interesting to note how Harner himself was initiated into the world of shamanism. While living among the Conibo, Harner’s ethnographic fieldwork was proceeding well. However, he found the Conibo reluctant to discuss their religious beliefs. After repeatedly questioning them about their spiritual views, he was told that in order to learn about their religion he would have to experience it first hand by taking ayahuasca, a powerful psychedelic drug used in their religious ceremonies.

Harner agreed to undergo the initiation and the ceremony began late in the afternoon. As the drug began to take affect, Harner had a number of visions, one of which was of a large vessel with a dragon-head prow filled with figures resembled ancient Egyptian depictions of birdmen. Harner wrote that at that moment, “Although I believed myself to be an atheist, I was completely certain that I was dying and that the bird-headed people had come to take my soul away on the boat” (1990, p. 4). Later in the experience he felt close to death:

Now I was virtually certain I was about to die. As I tried to accept my fate, an even lower portion of my brain began to transmit more visions and information. I was “told” that this new material was being presented to me because I was dying and therefore “safe” to
receive these revelations. *These were secrets reserved for the dying and the dead*, I was informed. (1980, p. 5; italics added)

Again we find the overlap between the shamanic experience and the theme of death. Harner’s experience was more of an ego death, rather than a physical death, and was similar to the experiences reported by Grof and Joan Halifax (1977) in their early work in psychedelic psychotherapy. Since his first initiation, Harner has worked in other shamanic traditions and discovered that, although powerful psychedelic drugs are used in some cultures, many people can easily learn to journey without these substances. In fact, sustained drumming, rattling, singing, and dancing are used in most shamanic cultures to gain access to the shamanic realm.

Harner has been very instrumental in making shamanic techniques widely available to Westerners. Many people who have had NDEs do attend his workshops, and Harner has commented on the connection between newly initiated shamans and NDErs:

The new shamans often cry tears of ecstasy when undergoing and recounting their experiences. They talk with mutual understanding with persons who have had near-death experiences and see hope where others may see hopelessness. (1980, xiv)

Through his workshops he has exposed thousands of Westerners to these ancient techniques. He reports that over 90 percent of his students have some success with shamanic techniques after even brief exposure. Many people report their journey experiences are very real in nature and easily distinguishable from fantasy or imagination. And although some people have more innate talent, Harner maintains that anyone can learn to enter into the shamanic realm with practice. Harner teaches what he refers to as core shamanism, which is his own distillation of the basic techniques practiced by shamans throughout the world. He differentiates between what he refers to as the Ordinary State of Consciousness (OSC) and the Shamanic State of Consciousness (SCC). While the OSC is the consensual reality that most of us share, the shaman is also able to enter into the SSC, which puts him or her in touch with the shamanic realm.

**Soul Loss and Soul Retrieval**

Ingerman is one of Harner’s closest colleagues, and an accomplished shaman in her own right; she is not only an shaman, but
also an NDEr. She discussed her own NDE and how it impacted the development of her shamanic skills:

Many survivors of near-death experiences report going to a great blinding light that pulsates only love. In my own near-death experience in 1971, I too, was received by the light. For me, this light represented the Father and Mother God. I started thinking about God's being pure light.

Traditionally shamans have been people who have had a near-death experience, life threatening illness, or a psychotic break. In my case, I almost drowned, and this near-death experience showed me the way to the other side. (1991, pp. 202)

The author of *Soul Retrieval* (1991) and *Welcome Home* (1994), Ingerman discussed her work as a modern shaman helping those who suffer from soul loss. Modern soul loss is often the result of traumatic events such as incest, abuse, loss of a loved one, surgery, accident, illness, miscarriage, abortion, the stress of combat, addiction, verbal abuse, or divorce. Although the accepted treatment for most of these disorders is psychotherapy, Ingerman pointed out that from the shamanic perspective, psychotherapy cannot be effective if the aspect of personality we are addressing is not present.

In retrieving a soul, the shaman's task is to enter into nonordinary reality and first locate the soul. Once the soul has been located, the shaman must then convince it to return to ordinary reality and re-integrate with the individual. Ingerman discussed the case of a man named David who came to her for a shamanic healing. He was in very poor physical condition at the time with Epstein-Barr virus as well as a number of other infections. He mentioned that just prior to his becoming sick, his girlfriend, whose name was Suzanne, had committed suicide. This alerted Ingerman to the possibility that this might have been a case of not just soul loss, but soul stealing. The following is also an excellent example of psychopompic work, during which the shaman helps the deceased soul become better situated in the afterlife. As Ingerman entered into the shamanic trance using sustained drumming:

I repeat my intention to focus myself. As I walk, I come to a tree where I see David tied by a rope around the trunk. He looks very forlorn and spiritually beaten. His head hangs down, and his soul shows no vitality. I don't like what I see, and I feel sensations of deep anger in my solar plexus. I yell out in nonordinary reality for my power animal to come and help me. No sooner do I call than he appears. He is just in time! Suddenly a woman jumps out from behind the tree where she is hiding and lunges at me with her im-
posing nails aimed at my face. My power animal steps in front of
me, creating a force field around us that she can't break through.
She repeatedly lunges at the field in anger but keeps being thrown
backward into the leaves. Finally, when she is exhausted, we care-
fully let the field down and walk close to her. She bursts into tears
and begins sobbing. She is Suzanne. (Ingerman, 1991, p. 105)

Ingerman asked the woman whether she knows that she is dead,
and she answered yes. Ingerman told Suzanne that she could help
her move to a more comfortable place, but in order to do so, she
would have to release David's soul. She refused. Ingerman then
turned to her power animal for help and was told to keep the con-
versation going:

"David is dying back in ordinary reality, because you are keeping
his soul captive." "That's good," she replies. "I want him to die, so
he can keep me company here. I want him to stay with me forever."
(1991, p. 105)

Although shamans are able to intervene, they are not able to hurt
or impose their will on others. Ingerman was now in the position of
having to convince the woman to release the soul:

I reach into my pocket and pull out a quartz crystal and hand it
to her. She loves the sparkling light, which starts to whirl around
and through her. She obviously is soaking it up.

"I can take you to a place where the light shines all the time
and will take care of you." She asks, "How do I get there?" "Give
me back David's soul, and I'll take you there." Suzanne looks at the
crystal and then at David and then at me. Seconds go by that seem
like hours, and finally she agrees to release David. I untie David
from the tree. He slides to the ground, lying still; his breathing is
shallow. I leave him there in the care of my power animal. I put
my arm around Suzanne's and we float upward. We continue to
move up and out of this place and travel through space, surrounded
by planets and stars. Suddenly we come to a skin membrane, which
we break through. Our pace quickens as we continue to rise, going
through layer upon layer of clouds. In the distance there is a blind-
ing light. I know I can go no further. "Suzanne, go to the light." At
this point I push her up, watching her disappear into the all-en-
compassing golden rays. (1991, pp. 105-6)

After returning with the soul parts, the shaman will then blow
them back into the client's body and seal the parts in by rattling
around the person. When Ingerman did so with David, he reported
feeling an immediate rush, his eyes brightened, and his physical con-
dition gradually improved. Ingerman reported that he continues to
enjoy good health to this day.
Shamanic Extractions

Often shamanic healings call for the extraction of some foreign object or element from the body. Larry Peters (1993) has written about an extraction he performed while in the small country of Tuva, where he was traveling as part of an expedition for Harner's Foundation for Shamanic Studies. One evening the expedition members, who were all shamanic practitioners, were invited to a gathering. When they arrived, they were quickly ushered on to a stage where a man with a serious heart condition had been brought. The man was so ill that he had come directly from his hospital bed to be seen by the visiting shamans. Peters described his experience as the group stood in a circle around the man:

[O]ur group began drumming quickly, each singing our own spirit song softly. After possibly ten to fifteen minutes of intense drumming, Gajandra [his teacher] appeared to me in a vision. He came out of the sky as a thunderbolt that struck my heart. I found it difficult to breathe. My body began to shake, first my belly, then the rest of my body. The rattle in my hand moved with nervous energy. I wanted to shout “Stop!” But I was overwhelmed and couldn't stop. My whole body was shaking. Gajandra had penetrated into my being, into my body. In the vision, I heard Gajandra say, “Get up, get up, get up.”

Tears flowed from my eyes, as I saw in the vision a golden nugget emanating light, first in the sky above. Then I was standing outside myself, observing myself, and the golden light was now encircling my head, now in my heart, now surrounding my body. I heard bells ringing on my feet, and I saw myself dancing. I was witnessing a person who looked like me. Was that me dancing? I looked down on the circle of drummers, and I watched myself dancing for a long time, circling the patient and the drummers. (1993, p. 46)

This is an excellent description of the ecstatic nature of the shamanic experience. Ten to 15 minutes into the drumming and singing, Peters had left his body and was witnessing the scene from above. When he returned to his body, he found himself transformed:

I'm not exactly sure how I returned to my body, but I became aware I was kneeling next to the patient, clawing at black poisonous spiders and other insects I saw crawling in his veins. I saw large wasps with huge stingers in his heart. I growled and hissed as I jumped at the insects. I thought to myself, “I'm behaving like a tiger.” Suddenly I was an orange, black, and white tiger with large saber fangs—the tiger Gajandra had taught me to be, the tiger that bites and sucks flesh at healing ceremonies. I bit and sucked out the insects. I felt their sharpness inside my mouth, then spit them out.
There were so many I thought I'd never get them all. I sucked the man's back. I bit and sucked his sides and rolled his body over. Saliva covered my face as I growled and bared my teeth. Picking up his shirt, I went straight for his heart.

At the time, I didn't know how long I had worked on the man. As I shape-shifted back into ordinary reality and fell back into my seat in the circle of drummers, I was exhausted. Sweat was pouring from me. I felt dazed and unbalanced. I remember feeling out of time, and I kept holding onto my colleagues for reassurance. The patient was visibly shaken. His hands and body continued to tremor as he was hurriedly escorted back to the hospital ambulance that brought him. (1993, pp. 46-47)

Although Peters was deeply concerned, he later learned that the man's condition had improved dramatically. In fact, when he visited with the man and his family a week later:

[H]e was vibrant, smiling and joking and embracing his wife. As his family served us dinner, he said he felt no pain. He sat tall. It was as if he were another person. He talked about going back to work. He had developed a passion for life, disclosing that he had changed his diet, and I noticed that he didn't drink while the others toasted each of us. His coloring and countenance had completely changed. (1993, p. 47)

Active Dreaming

Another dramatic healing comes from the work of Robert Moss (1994). Moss, who incorporates both shamanic techniques and dream work in his approach, which he refers to as active dreaming, described the experience of a woman named Wanda, a natural healer who had worked with Moss for several years. Over a period of 20 years Wanda had a recurring dream during which she was told that she would die in her 40s. She was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 43. The cancer was felt to be spreading quickly and she underwent a modified radical mastectomy and chemotherapy. During and following the chemotherapy, she was having a very difficult time. Moss journeyed on her behalf:

One night in a hypnogogic dream state, I journeyed to check on her. I found her in a night setting, near a cave that was also a temple. A circle of women were performing a ritual nearby, but Wanda was not part of it. She was frozen, paralyzed in terror of some shadowy, snakelike forms that menaced her on all sides. I grabbed two of the "snakes" and wound them into the form of a caduceus. Instantly,
the healing staff came brilliantly alight in my hand. It radiated intense golden light. I touched Wanda with it. She promptly vanished. (Moss, 1994, p. 22)

Wanda later told Moss that she had also had a dream that night, a dream in which he had “flooded her with light.” Following the dream she also felt buoyant and released from the malaise of the past weeks. Apparently, this dream energized Wanda and prepared her for a dream that she had on the night before her 44th birthday, a dream that Moss wrote “quite literally, gave her a new lease on life” (1994, p. 22). Wanda dreamt:

I am climbing to the top of a mountain where an awesome presence is waiting for me. I know that this powerful being sent the messenger who told me I had to leave Earth. It moves like waves of light. It conveys its wishes and emotions by thought. I am terrified, but I never back away. The entity reminds me that I agreed before I came to this planet that I would leave at forty-three. I acknowledge this is true. I am shown a contract with my signature on it.

I argue that this contract should not be executed. I tell the entity that I didn’t want to come here when I made the contract. But now I have people that I love and people I believe I can help to heal, because of my own experiences. I tell him, “You must know this, because you allowed me to discover my illness through dreams before my time was spent.”

There is a time lapse. It seems like an eternity. Then I am presented with a new contract. I am given more time to help others. (Moss, 1994, p. 22)

Awakening from this dream, Wanda found herself trembling and crying with joy. Later, she told Moss that the dream was unlike any she had ever had before because she was both awake and asleep at the same time, which is a description of a lucid dream.

Shamanism and Applied Science

Shamanism is a method that honors traditional biological and psychological interventions, rather than attempting to compete with them. The cases presented above are examples of dramatic cures that provide intriguing anecdotal evidence for the effectiveness of shamanic techniques. However, my own belief is that shamanism will need to pass the test of scientific scrutiny before it achieves wider acceptance in our society. Fortunately, this may be easier than it might appear.
In the case of NDEs, it is difficult to verify that the experiences reported actually occurred. In other words, while remaining in the Ordinary State of Consciousness, it is impossible for a researcher to prove scientifically that someone has left the physical body, traveled down a tunnel, entered into a light, met and conversed with dead friends and relatives, and so on. The experience itself is subjective and, like all other subjective phenomena, is impervious to direct scientific study.

A similar situation exists in dealing with shamanic journeys. Unless the researcher is able to enter into the Shamanic State of Consciousness, and travel with the practitioner into these realms, it is impossible to verify that the shaman did, in fact, do so. However, from a purely clinical perspective, there is no need to verify the subjective aspect of shamanic interventions. In order to employ it ethically as a viable treatment modality, we need prove only that the treatment was effective in alleviating the problematic condition, that it is safe, and that it is other than placebo. The underlying theory about why these techniques are effective can remain theoretical indefinitely.

Similar situations occur quite often in modern medicine. To take just one example, no one has been able to identify which pharmacological action of some of the new generation of antidepressant medications is the active mechanism in alleviating depression. In other words, what happens once the person takes the medication, how it works within the brain to alleviate depressive symptoms is, in a sense, a subjective experience. At this point, all we can do is theorize about what may be happening inside the brain that results in symptom relief. Despite this, we are able to prove these medications are effective in treating depression using the most rigorous scientific methods, and because of this, we use them, assuming that further research will someday answer the question of why they work.

In the case of shamanic interventions, many Western practitioners have now begun to use the methods, some with great success. And they have also set forth a theory, the same theory that also underlies NDEs, that some individuals are able to enter into the shamanic or spiritual realm, journey to different geographical areas, interact with spiritual beings that exist in those areas, and bring back information that is helpful in alleviating human suffering. And although they cannot at this time prove their theory, the effects of their interventions are objective facts that are well within the realm of the most rigorous scientific study. Although these studies have yet to be done, if shamanic techniques can be shown to be effective, they should be em-
ployed along with biological and psychological treatments. To refuse to do so, simply because one holds a worldview inconsistent with the theory underlying this particular treatment modality, should be considered unethical, the ethical consideration being the best interest of the patient.

Finally, although there is no longer any controversy around the issue of whether NDEs are reported, skeptics have always been able to dismiss these accounts because they are subjective phenomena. However, every successful shamanic intervention also provides evidence in support of the theory underlying NDEs. As shamanism gains wider acceptance, what was theory will slowly become accepted scientific fact, at which point the shift in paradigms will have been completed.

Conclusion

A profound shift in paradigm is already well underway, and the field of near-death studies can pride itself for having played a major role in this shift. After 20 years of research into near-death experiences, investigators have thoroughly documented the existence of this phenomenon. An entire generation has grown up hearing and reading about these accounts, which are now taken for granted. We are now in a position enter into a new phase, evolving from pure science, to the development of a therapeutic modality, one based on spiritual principles, that will stand side by side with biological and psychological treatments. If we recognize the overlap between NDEs and shamanism, and realize that much of the work has already been done by shamans who have kept these sacred techniques alive, we will have an excellent starting point. This knowledge has been brought back to Western culture and is now available to anyone who chooses to walk the path of the shaman. NDErs have, in fact, already begun to tread this path and, for those who choose to pursue it, formalized training in shamanism may help them realize the true potential of their experience.

References


BOOK REVIEW

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Parting Visions: Uses and Meanings of Pre-Death, Psychic, and Spiritual Experiences, by Melvin Morse, with Paul Perry.

This is Melvin Morse's third book written with the help of Paul Perry. *Closer to the Light: Learning From Children's Near-Death Experiences* was published in 1990 and *Transformed by the Light: The Powerful Effect of Near-Death Experiences on People's Lives* came out in 1992. These earlier works presented Morse's pioneering work on children's near-death experiences (NDEs), and on how those who had NDEs as children had had their lives transformed now that they were adults.

*Parting Visions*, like their previous collaborations, is written in a clear, organized, and invigorating style. Anyone interested in near-death and related experiences will enjoy reading this book. Morse and Perry weave together the results of Morse's and others' research for a general audience, avoiding complicated scientific language and the use of references and footnotes. This is a strength in terms of readability but an annoyance for the serious scholar who would like to follow up on Morse's arguments by reading resources mentioned in the text. Morse and Perry offer a lengthy bibliography, but not every author or work mentioned in the text is cited in the bibliography. Like their previous two books, *Parting Visions* lacks an index, which would have made this book more reader-friendly.

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As the title of the book indicates, Morse examines a variety of what he calls "spiritual" or nonordinary experiences that he puts under the umbrella phase of "death-related visions." These include precognitive experiences, deathbed visions, NDEs, post-death visitations, and healing visions. Morse states that his aim in writing this book was, as a researcher, to gain a better understanding of these visions, and as a clinician, to explore the healing possibilities of these experiences. Unlike his previous two books, the focus here is on people of all ages; and while presenting some of his own research, this one relies much more heavily on what others have done in these areas.

In the prologue, Morse spends some time arguing that research into NDEs and acceptance of NDEs have reached a point where "patients who have near-death experiences no longer have to worry about being branded mentally ill or 'weird.' Instead medical schools now teach that the near-death experience is a natural and normal part of life, and doctors everywhere are removing their intellectual blinders" (pp. xiv-xv). He does not present any evidence for this conclusion, and many of us would call such a statement exaggerated and wishful thinking.

The early sections of the book present a number of stories illustrating a variety of death-related visions. These include NDEs, post-death visitations, deathbed visions, and shared visions. Very striking are the shared visions or dreams about the medical condition and prognosis of an older woman by members of her family. Early into the second chapter of the book Morse concludes that all these types of visions are "cut from the same cloth" (p. 33). He argues that what binds these visions together is that they have the power to reduce our fear of dying and comfort us in our grief. This common theme continues throughout the book.

Morse could have strengthened the argument that all these visions share a common thread if he had discussed the works of others who studied these related visions. For example, in the area of deathbed visions, Karlis Osis and Erlandur Haraldsson's work (1977) is included in the bibliography but not discussed in the text. Likewise, he does not refer at all to the illuminating book by Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley (1992) in which they discussed the concept of "nearing-death awareness," and how these experiences are similar to, yet different from, NDEs.

The third chapter discusses an unpublished study done by Richard Hardoin and Judy Henslee on parents who have had children die of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Morse uses the study to bring
in premonitions of death as one type of death-related visions. Although he mentions the fact that nine of the respondents felt that the premonitions helped them in their grieving, he also mentions that 18 reported that the premonitions created feelings of helplessness, fear, anger, and guilt. So much for the comfort factor of these experiences! This chapter does not support totally the common theme of the comforting and healing functions of death-related visions.

In the first three chapters Morse raises two interesting questions. First, can we find a common link for all these visions that would shed light on the source of these mystical or spiritual experiences? Second, can we go beyond clinical examples to validate these visionary experiences using scientific methods? For answers to these questions Morse returns to what he calls the “circuit boards of mysticism”: the common source for all these visions, according to Morse, is located in an area of the brain that when stimulated triggers visionary experiences. This area is the right temporal lobe. Morse's two earlier books presented the similar thesis that this “seat of the soul,” the right temporal lobe, is the physical source for NDEs.

In Parting Visions, he argues that NDEs as well as all other spiritual visions emanate from this site. Two reviewers of his earlier books (Kastenbaum, 1992; Twemlow, 1991) commented that this is an interesting theory; however, Morse presents this theory as a fact proven by his and others' research. Unfortunately, no new compelling evidence is offered in this book to bolster this theory.

Furthermore, Morse repeats his summary of a retrospective study at Seattle Children's Hospital where he compared children who almost died and those who were seriously ill, in order to show that only those near to death had NDEs. Previously, Stuart Twemlow (1991) questioned the criteria for assigning the patients to these two groups in this study, and Morse's statement, without mentioning evidence to the contrary, that only persons close to death can have NDEs. Morse's argument is just as controversial here as in his first book, and ignoring evidence contrary to his does not help his argument nor the case for the scholarly investigation of NDEs.

Toward the end of the fourth chapter Morse offers some results from his own research into the transformative effects of NDEs. Using a battery of three-hour tests, he has found that other visionary experiences are as transformative as NDEs. He indicates that it does not matter whether someone has a vision while dying or while near someone else who is dying, while sleeping, or in a state of spiritual crisis: "the same sort of visions take place, with same effects on the
person having them” (p. 89). If a person can have a death-related vision without being close to death, then Morse’s argument in the Seattle Hospital study that only children close to death have NDEs seems very strained.

In the next chapter Morse states that knowledge of death-related visions makes him a member of “the secret club,” a club composed of persons who want to use this understanding in the practice of medicine. Once he started publishing his studies on NDEs, Morse found that other health care professionals, physicians, and nurses began to contact him with stories of out-of-body experiences, parting visions, and other visionary experiences, and how they have helped people die peacefully. Morse gives the example of Gören Grip, a Swedish anesthesiologist who had an NDE as a child and is now able to go beyond the cold, hard facts of what dying is like and offer the spiritual aspects to his patients. Morse chides his fellow physicians for failing to talk about the spiritual aspects of dying and death-related visions. He argues that most physicians are insensitive to these visions because of their need for scientific proof, their need to process patients faster, their fear of criticism, and their fear of loss of control over the dying process.

Furthermore, Morse argues that knowledge of death-related visions not only gives us an understanding of what our own death will be like, but also offers meaningful lessons about living. For example, these visions can help us to live more fully, with less fear of death, and can help us to integrate spirituality into our everyday lives. According to Morse, such knowledge can also affect the practice of medicine, as it already has in such areas as therapeutic touch as a form of healing, and sensing auras to diagnose drug withdrawal and ear infections. He gives the example of a woman who had an almost “pathological fear of death,” who then read several books on these experiences and was subsequently able to help her mother die, and then went on to work with the terminally ill in a local hospice.

These latter chapters, along with the last major chapter on the significance of these visions in everyday life, read almost like an inspirational religious treatise. For example, Morse states that his “scientific studies of death-related visions have convinced me that our ordinary lives are filled with purpose and meaning” (p. 165). Furthermore, he argues that there is a divine “something” that is the “glue” for the universe, and that on the basis of his research we should accept that the same light that is present in NDEs and other
death-related visions is always present in our lives. These are strong statements that come more from Morse’s faith than from his science.

In the last chapter Morse adds one paragraph on the meaning of “hellish” NDEs, concluding that these experiences are the result of an “unhappy, hellish life” (p. 173). He offers no evidence for this conclusion beyond one short anecdote. Morse does list the study by Bruce Greyson and Nancy Evans Bush (1992) on distressing NDEs in the bibliography, a study that postulates three types of frightening experiences, and which discusses the complexity of such experiences. However, Morse does not mention in the text that his interpretation might not be the only way to explain why some people have hellish NDEs, and that these experiences might be more complex than he portrays them. The book would have been better off without this paragraph.

All in all, keeping in mind its tendency to offer conclusions that sometimes go beyond the evidence offered, this is a well-written book that articulates very nicely the vision, passion, and faith of a man who sees death-related visions as a meaningful and integral part of our lives.

References


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