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Editor's Foreword

We start this issue of the Journal with a Guest Editorial by Danish philosophy student René Jorgensen comparing the experience of light in near-death experiences (NDEs) with the Clear Light described in The Tibetan Book of the Dead. Drawing heavily on his own light experience, Jorgensen argues that some NDEs and NDE-like experiences can foster a nondualistic perception in which the experiencer and the light become one, which can lead to spiritual liberation as described in The Tibetan Book of the Dead. Then in a commentary on Jorgensen's editorial, Buddhist theologian and research behavioral scientist Todd Murphy challenges Jorgensen's literal interpretation of Buddhist scriptures. He suggests that similarities between NDEs' experiences of light and the metaphoric descriptions of the Clear Light in The Tibetan Book of the Dead may reflect underlying neural mechanisms and establish neither the objective validity of either description nor their relevance to enlightenment.

Next, sociologist James McClenon reports on African NDEs and related experiences from Kongo and Basuto cultures, documenting both universal phenomenological features and culturally specific elements. He argues that NDEs are related to shamanism, and discusses the evolutionary advantages of the ability to experience transcendence, building on his previous description of ritual healing theory (McClenon, 2006). Then psychologist Ken Vincent and Unitarian Universalist minister John Morgan present the unusually detailed autobiographical account of an NDE by 18th-century physician and minister George de Benneville. Vincent and Morgan note that de Benneville's experience was consistent with both ancient and modern NDEs and discuss its theological implications.

We also include in this issue a report by near-death experiencers Yolaine Stout, Linda Jacquin, and P.M.H Atwater of the first experiencers' retreat sponsored by the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS). Although IANDS had sponsored a workshop for clinicians, many of whom were also experiencers, to discuss NDE-related problems and solutions more than two decades ago (Greyson and Harris, 1987), this retreat was the first assembly
solely of experiencers to focus on the challenges that commonly follow NDEs and on possible responses to those challenges.

This issue concludes with a Letter to the Editor from electrical engineer Dennis Purcell, coordinator of the Los Angeles Friends of IANDS, suggesting the development of physical sensors to detect a disembodied consciousness in places where NDEs and out-of-body experiences might occur.

References


Bruce Greyson, M.D.
Guest Editorial

Guest Editorial: Nondualistic Experiences of Light in Near-Death Experiences and in The Tibetan Book of the Dead

René Jorgensen
University of Copenhagen

ABSTRACT: This editorial brings together two forms of human understanding of disembodied consciousness: the light in the near-death experience (NDE), and the Clear Light in the Tibetan Book of the Dead. I begin by telling the story of my own NDE. Then I compare my experience with the Tibetan Book of the Dead, to find points where the two are similar. To show that my NDE contained features in common with others, I also compare my experience with those found in the near-death literature. Specifically, I suggest that some NDEs provide a basis for the understanding of a nondualistic perception of the Clear Light. I also explore a broader and more unified understanding of enlightenment, based on the concept of the Clear Light. I argue that the NDEr could be on the right side of the dividing line in natural liberation, explaining how the experience of light as reported by NDErs could represent insight into spiritual liberation. Finally, I close by comparing the message from NDEs and the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and pose questions for future research in the field of near-death studies.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience; The Tibetan Book of the Dead; light; Clear Light; enlightenment; liberation.

In March of 2000, I had an experience that I would later describe as a near-death experience (NDE). I was not near to physical death but in
a situation where I was overwhelmed by fear and spiritual insight. On a trip to India I had a mystical experience with a girl whom I had met on my travel. At the moment my NDE happened she was questioning me and penetrating deep within me. Her questions frightened me, and with nowhere to hide, I felt as if I were pressed against a wall. I felt like a little child who was caught lying, and with no way out I was overtaken by fear. This felt like a kind of ego death, where the lying part of me was exposed and dying.

This fear caused a split in me between the lying part of me and another part of me. I believe the confusion from this split was what made me leave my body. Suddenly, in an extremely powerful sensation, I was leaving my body to a place 10 to 15 feet in the air. From there I could look down and see my body sitting where had left it. The sensation of leaving my body could be described as if I were falling, and the pull of gravity was tearing me apart. This totally overpowering sensation was a feeling of unlimited love beyond comprehension. It felt as if I were being dissolved in a massive explosion of pure love.

I became infinite space of what felt like unbound awareness. This state was like a transparent light, and my awareness was no longer subjective. I felt as if my awareness had no boundaries and that I knew all that there was to know in the universe, as if I were part of everything and had knowledge of it all. I recognized this state to be my true nature, as if it were my essence. This recognition that my true nature was unlimited love was the most powerful and overwhelming revelation of my life, a most profound revelation beyond human expression.

From this realization of what I experienced as the true nature of reality, I now began to see my life in review. I saw all the negative actions that I had done, causing pain and suffering to others. I saw myself being angry with my mother, hurting a girlfriend, and I experienced the pain that I had inflicted upon others. Even an incident from 5th grade that I had long forgotten came back to me during my review. During a break in school I was teasing a smaller girl in the schoolyard. In my review I saw her standing against the wall crying while I called her names. I could not hear the words, but I felt her pain. Not only did I see the pain that I was causing to her in that moment, I also felt the full consequences that my action had on her life. I felt the pain that I had planted in her, and how this pain would turn into a scar that would stay with her all her life. I felt her being
unhappy in her years of school, becoming less outgoing as a person later in life.

In my review, I saw everything that I was ignorant about before, and this knowledge now came to me in its full depth. The pain of becoming aware of this was indescribable. Having just experienced my true nature to be infinite love, I felt as if I had gone against myself and done these things to myself. Just as the experience of love before had felt like an explosion tearing me apart, now, too, the pain I felt was equally powerful. It felt as if I were failing, and gravity was pulling me apart in the painful realization that I had gone against love as my own true nature. This experience made me humble beyond human understanding, and I felt incredibly deep regret for my actions.

Then I was shown all the suffering in the world. I saw all the hunger, all the poor people, all the conflict and war. This sensation was too intense to bear. There was no way my heart could contain all this suffering. I knew I had to do something about all the pain in the world, and that realization made the feeling change back into the all-overpowering sensation of unlimited love again. Then I had a life preview where I saw myself living my life in love and giving compassion to others. I saw myself returning, at the end of my life, to the light, and I knew that was where I would go when I died.

After my experience, I felt as if my consciousness was expanded for many days. I had lucid dreams for many nights. When I finally returned home, I started to become confused. I felt that the reality that I had experienced was more real than the one I was in now. This made me believe that there were two realities, where before there had been only one. The feeling of equal reality of the two worlds made me confused about which was the real one. I started to wonder if I had lost my mind, and I began psychotherapy to regain my foothold in this world. I went through a full year of therapy before I had found the right balance between the two realities.

My psychotherapist called my experience a “dramatic ego death experience” in which I had been “confronted by a spiritual insight I was not prepared to understand.” Through working with the theories of Carl Jung, my therapist helped me integrate my experience and regain my foothold in this world. By understanding the spiritual or paranormal elements of my experience, I regained my inner balance.

Before this experience, I had always viewed myself as an atheist. I never believed in God, and when people would raise this subject, I would always ask for “proof” of His existence. But my experience gave
me a proof that was almost too big to handle. The transformation from believing in nothing, to having a direct experience of a transcendent state of reality, more real to me than this world, had a powerful impact on my mind. I was blown away beyond comprehension, and convinced that there was more in our universe than meets the eye.

This revelation opened me to alternative thinking. I began to study religion and philosophy, where I found many descriptions that resembled my experience. Through the practice of meditation, I could reconnect with the state of mind that I had experienced. But it was not until I came across the recent research into NDEs that I truly felt at home. The NDE was the most precise description of what had happened to me, and I was relieved to find that there were many others who had reported similar experiences.

**Merging with the Light**

I was stimulated to write this editorial in response to the article in this Journal entitled, "The Reimagination of Death: Dream Yoga, Near-Death, and Clear Light," by Raymond Lee (2004). In this article and other comparisons between NDEs and the Tibetan Book of the Dead, I noted a tendency to focus on the differences between the two, resulting in important similarities being overlooked.

It certainly seems true, as Lee wrote, that many NDErs seem to have a dualistic perception of the light. NDErs' reports of being in heaven and of seeing beings of light and religious figures suggest a clear separation between the experiencer and the light. However, as in my own experience, not all NDErs have a dualistic experience of the light. My reason for writing this editorial is to bring a nondualistic perspective to readers of this Journal.

In the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Clear Light appears after death in the Luminous Bardo of Dharmata. Here the Ground Luminosity, or the true nature of mind, manifests itself as the Clear Light. This manifestation of the light happens not only to selected individuals but to ordinary people as well (Tsele Rangdröl, 2002, p. 47). W. Y. Evans-Wentz wrote that "At this moment, the first (glimpsing) of the Bardo of the Clear Light of Reality, which is the Infallible Mind of the Dharma-Kaya, is experienced by all sentient beings" (Evans-Wentz, 2004, p. 92).

The mind of Dharmakaya is the ultimate nature of mind, and it is described as the fundamental truth, in which all dualities merge into
transcendent oneness (Lodö, 1987, p. 7). Assuming the two lights are one and the same, NDErs who merge with the Clear Light would experience transcendent oneness. And the oneness with this fundamental reality of the mind would be the basis of enlightenment or spiritual liberation. Enlightenment or liberation, in Buddhist context, means awakening to the true nature of the mind, which is seen as the fundamental truth.

Lee wrote that both Melvin Morse and Mark Fox saw merely a dualistic relationship to the light: the light was viewed only as an external object acting on the NDEr, rather than being part of the NDEr's identity (Lee, 2004, p. 231). My own NDE did not have a dualistic relationship to the light. Rather, my experience was that of a nondual awareness of the light as internally self-contained. I was one with the light, and there was no difference between perceiver and perceived, which made it an experience of nonduality. For me, one of the best interpretations of this experience came from Carl Jung, who wrote:

The union of the conscious mind or ego-personality with the unconscious personified as anima produces a new personality compounded of both. ... Not that the new personality is a third thing midway between conscious and unconscious, it is both together ... both ego and non-ego, subjective and objective, individual and collective. It is the "uniting symbol" which epitomizes the total union of opposites. (Yates, 1999, p. 78)

Furthermore, my experience of merging with the light was not unique. There are other NDEs with no division of subject and object, and other NDErs do share my experience of merging with the light. This merger with the light can be experienced, as in my case, as consciousness dissolving into space, as being pure consciousness without occupying any space. Raymond Moody wrote: "They didn't feel that, after the release, they were in any kind of 'body' at all. They felt as though they were 'pure' consciousness" (Moody, 1975, p. 42). In the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* we find that

There is no projectionist who projects thoughts by thinking them, then, one's own mind, completely free from conceptual projections, will become luminously clear. This intrinsic awareness, union of inner radiance and emptiness, is the Buddha-body of Reality. (Dorje, 2005, p. 45)

Sogyal Rinpoche also wrote about some NDErs merging with the light: "Others recount how they not only see the light, but enter
directly into the light” (Sogyal, 1992, p. 324). He also gave one of the clearest accounts in describing this merger from Margot Grey's research: “I had no sense of separate identity. I was the light and one with it” (Grey, 1985, p. 46).

In my NDE I experienced something similar: I was in total union with the light as my true nature. The phenomenon that provided the “no I” experience was that my awareness seemed to be unbound and omnipresent. I was no longer myself; I was the light. Another NDEr expressed this experience as “I was the LIGHT and the LIGHT was me” (Atwater, 2000, p. 28).

Margot Grey reported that 39 percent of NDErs experienced being “enveloped in light and love” (Grey, 1985, p. 31). One experiencer explained, “I was one with pure light and love. I was one with God and at the same time one with everything.” Another explained, “All was fusion” (Grey, 1985, p. 33). Another NDEr explained, “This radiation of love entered me and instantly I was part of it and it was part of me” (Grey, 1985, p. 48). Others use the words “a boundless sense of expansion,” “a merging into the light,” and “light enveloped me” (Grey, 1985, p. 47).

Grey concluded, “Many people report feeling enveloped by this light” (Grey, 1985, p. 44). Raymond Moody found similar cases: “There was a gold-looking light, everywhere. Beautiful. I couldn’t find a source anywhere. It was all around coming from everywhere.” Another NDEr explained, “There was a sense of perfect peace and contentment; love. It was like I was part of it” (Moody, 1977, p. 24). Peter Fenwick also reported that some NDErs entered the light. He wrote, “Although some people describe entering the light and feeling themselves enfolded in it, enveloped in warmth and love, for others there is a realisation that the light marks a point of no return” (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1995, p. 58).

This experience in some NDEs seems similar to the “Supreme Union” between child and mother described in the Tibetan Book of the Dead. This union is the merger with the objective Clear Light of the transparent ultimate reality beyond subject-object duality, where one becomes “purified” (Thurman, 2001, p. 130). In the Tibetan tradition this purification happens as the gross mind, or conceptual mind, is dissolved into the true nature of mind. Thurman explained this as follows: “At enlightenment the ordinary mind expands in an experience of oneness with the infinity of beings and things, which becomes a permanent awareness” (Thurman, 2001, p. 248).
This union happens after death when we leave the *Bardo of Dying*, and enter into the *Bardo of Dharmata*. This *bardo*, or state, holds the *Sambhogakaya Luminosity*, a light that is extremely clear, brilliant, open, and empty. In this state one feels free and blissful (Nyima Rinpoche, 2003, p. 127). The dividing line between the two *bardos* is the moment we cease clinging to our ego, and our innate wisdom, the *Luminosity of Dharmata*, appears in its purest state, which is felt as a mindless oblivion (Nyima Rinpoche, 2003, pp. 121 and 113).

This, for me, is a precise description of what happened in my NDE, crossing the line from subjective ego awareness to an open and empty mindless oblivion that felt blissful. I felt my awareness dissolving, or expanding, into infinite space of unlimited love. It was as if my subjective awareness expanded into a boundless state of pure consciousness.

This inner dissolution process that takes place in the *Bardo of Dharmata* sounds to me like what I experienced. The beginning of the *Bardo of Dharmata* starts with the seven very subtle dissolution stages. This dissolution ends in the display of the Ground Luminosity, described like a cloudless sky, as awareness and emptiness of primordial purity (Tsele Rangdröl, 2002, p. 52). This experience of pure and empty awareness was also part of my NDE. The unfolding of the *Bardo of Dharmata* begins with consciousness dissolving into space, and then space into luminosity. Luminosity then dissolves into union, which then dissolves into wisdom. Wisdom then dissolves into presence, which finally dissolves into purity of awareness (Nyima Rinpoche, 2003, pp. 14–15): “At this point, it is the nature of things that the person will automatically have the five superknowledges, the six recollections, and perfect recall, previously known as well as unknown, will arise within one’s mind” (Tsele Rangdröl, 2001, p. 52).

The state of Nirvana, or enlightenment, holds the “highest fruit of wisdom,” being a state of ultimate freedom beyond this world as the final truth (Thurman, 2001, pp. 248 and 267). Just as this state of enlightenment holds the knowledge of everything, so too does the light in the NDE hold all the answers to the universe. One NDEr said she “knew the answer to every mystery – I was not told, I just knew, the light held all the answers” (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1995, p. 74). Another said, “It seemed that all of a sudden, all knowledge – of all that had started from the very beginning, that would go on without end – that for a second I knew all the secrets of all ages, all the meaning of the universe, the stars, the moon – of everything” (Moody,
Another said, "It was in all forms of communication, sights, sounds, thoughts. It was any- and everything. It was as if there was nothing that wasn't known. All knowledge was there, not just in one field, but everything" (Moody, 1977, p. 11).

In the NDE this is sometimes felt as a homecoming. Fenwick wrote: "not only is the experience felt as complete, but this completeness is a 'coming home'. It is as if they had always known this state" (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1995, p. 69). Moody also found that some compared death to a "homecoming," while others likened it to other psychologically positive states, such as awakening, to graduating, or escaping from jail (Moody, 1975, p. 97).

Moody further wrote: "This has been described as a moment of enlightenment in which the subject seemed to have complete knowledge" (Moody, 1977, p. 18). Fenwick reached a similar conclusion: "With the peace often comes a feeling of profound knowledge, a realisation that you have been given the answer to all the secrets of the universe" (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1995, p. 74). An NDEr reported: "Enlightenment is the wonder, and here I understood the universe" (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1995, p. 74).

Another feature that is common to both the NDE and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is the sensation of the merger with the light. Just as the NDE holds an extreme sensation, so too does the final state of liberation. In my experience, it was a powerful pull like gravity dissolving my body in an explosion of unlimited love beyond comprehension.

In the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, recognizing the Clear Light at death is the supreme accomplishment of the "Great Seal." This is described as follows: "Ultimate reality as the ultimate lover, experiencing voidness as a total mental and physical union between oneself as orgasmic bliss" (Thurman, 2001, p. 125). In the Buddhist tradition, this ultimate reality is described as "being indescribable, inconceivable, and unable to be signified by any word, gesture, or concept" (Ponlop, 2006, p. 45).

This, to me, sounds very much like the NDE. My experience felt like an explosion of pure love a thousand times stronger than anything I have ever experienced in this dimension. Again, this experience of mine is not unique:

Some people consider a very intense sexual experience as love and they consider it possibly the most beautiful moment of their life – and it couldn't even begin to compare. All of these wonderful, wonderful feelings combined could not possibly compare to the feeling, the true
love. If you can imagine what pure love would be, this would be the feeling that you'd get from this brilliant white light. (Ring, 1985, p. 58)

Another NDEer reported: “the only way I can describe it, is pure bliss and love” (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1995, p. 6). Fenwick wrote, “Often people feel that the experience is one of universal love, that the structure of the world is love” (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1995, p. 12). In Fenwick’s British sample of more than 300 NDErs, 77 percent experienced peace or euphoria (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1995, p. 163). Grey found in a British sample of 38 NDErs that 47 percent experienced peace and euphoria, and 29 percent experienced joy and happiness (Grey, 1985, p. 31). The Evergreen Study of 55 NDEs found 74.5 percent included serenity with a feeling of overwhelming peace (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981), and in the Southern California Study of 50 NDEs, this number was 70 percent (Green and Friedman, 1983).

Fenwick explained further:

About 88 per cent of those who filled in our questionnaire described feelings of calm or peace or joy during their experience (82 per cent mention peace and calm, about 40 per cent feelings of joy). This means that these positive feelings are far more common than the light or the tunnel, or indeed any of the other phenomena of the NDE. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1995, p. 69)

The Dividing Line

The real issue in this is, of course, whether the NDE is or is not a staircase to enlightenment. We all have different reasons for our beliefs, and my belief comes from what I find to be very similar experiences in the NDE and the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Now, to take on the core issue, I offer an alternative view on the dividing line in enlightenment that is more open to the NDE. I argue only that NDErs have the possibility of reaching enlightenment, not that all NDErs are guaranteed to reach it.

From the Buddhist view, His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, wrote:

to begin with, it’s not at all true that one needs to be an experienced yogi in order to experience the clear light. Everyone can have that encounter. It’s quite feasible that the experiences of light that (NDErs have) described are facsimiles of clear light. (Dalai Lama, 1997, p. 208)
In the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* we find that the dividing line in spiritual liberation is whether or not we are able to recognize the light. By recognizing the light we recognize the true nature of mind, the Ground Luminosity, and thereby we are liberated. In the Tibetan tradition there is no doubt that the Ground Luminosity is the true ground of liberation, and that the Clear Light is the basis of this liberation into the ultimate reality. People who fail to be liberated do so either because they fail to recognize the Clear Light, or because they are not able to remain in its continuity (Tsele Rangdröl, 2002, p. 48).

Now, the essential question arises: what does it take to recognize the light? The Buddhist tradition emphasizes purifying the mind through meditation, which is an excellent method. We also find techniques of visualization and the help of masters, together with *Dream Yoga*, as Lee pointed out. But could the door to liberation not also be open to NDErs?

Lee explained that generally, without nondualistic training as in *Dream Yoga*, the NDEr cannot become cognizant of the continuum between mind and light (Lee, 2004, p. 232). But as I quoted from the Dalai Lama above, it does not take an experienced yogi to experience the light, and therefore, the question remains: what does it mean to train in a nondualistic state of mind?

In the *Bardo Guidebook*, Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche wrote: “training in it means simply maintaining a continuity of wakefulness” (Nyima Rinpoche, 2003, p. 131). I agree that meditation is a very good tool for training the mind, but I do not think that meditation is the only way to bring about a continuity of wakefulness.

As humanity evolves, so, too, does the mind. As more and more people in the world experience the effects of the *Age of Enlightenment*, they may also experience a continuity of wakefulness. And as people learn to reflect they may also purify their minds, bringing about a natural state of nonconceptual wakefulness. When we consider that people from all cultures have been dying peacefully for ages, and that many NDErs have met the light and have gained confidence in its nature, it seems to me that the dividing line in spiritual liberation should be broader.

Sogyal wrote: “Even though the Ground Luminosity presents itself naturally to us all, most of us are totally unprepared for its sheer immensity” (Sogyal, 1992, p. 261). But I would suggest that most NDErs are not unprepared for this immensity. They rather look
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forward to it. Tsele Natsok Rangdröl explained that ordinary people do not attain liberation because they lack confidence in and familiarity with the light (Tsele Rangdröl, 2002, p. 67). But many NDErs have that confidence and familiarity. They are very positive about death: “I have no fear when my time for dying comes. I look forward to it with expectation of that wonderful joy and peace” (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1995, p. 130). Fenwick found that 82 percent of NDErs said that they had less fear of death (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1995, p. 3). Moody wrote: “In some form or another, almost every person has expressed to me the thought that he is no longer afraid of death” (Moody, 1975, p. 94).

The NDE imparts confidence about dying because of a sense of familiarity with the light. The experience often includes a sense of “coming home” with a feeling of peace and love, from which some NDErs do not want to return to this life. This corresponds with the state of Amitabha Buddha, where one is born in the land of ultimate bliss and peace. “The Sambhogakaya represents the Supreme Joy. If you can realize this extraordinary joy and wisdom, you will attain the state of Amitabha, and you will not be lost in the Bardo” (Lodö, 1987, p. 6).

The reason that people fail to reach enlightenment at death is that they are unable to recognize the Clear Light. I am not saying that experiencing the light equals liberation, since it is still possible for the experiencer to get lost in the life review or other realms. But if the Clear Light and the light of the NDE are one and the same, then recognition of the Clear Light at death should at least be easier for those who have already seen the light before in an NDE.

Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche wrote:

Someone who has realized the Ultimate truth of the natural state, totally beyond mental constructs, does not have to undergo these Bardos. The Bardo states are only experienced by people who have not recognized the Ultimate truth and actualized it (Nyima Rinpoche, 2003, p. 163)

Enlightenment at death is easier than attaining full enlightenment in life. Tsele Rinpoche wrote that it is easier to recognize our true nature, the Ground Luminosity, at death, because the mind is set free. As we leave the body, the mind is ungrounded and unfettered by the encasement of the body (Nyima Rinpoche, 2002, p. 157). Those experiencers who have realized the nature of the light in their NDEs should have a greater chance of recognizing it again when they die. Sogyal Rinpoche wrote: “Once the nature of mind has been introduced
and you recognize it, you have a key to recognizing it again” (Sogyal Rinpoche, 1998, p. 263).

The key is to recognize our essence, which is the light. When the door to liberation opens through the light, we enter it by knowing who we are, and abiding in that state (Evans-Wentz, 2004, p. 91). Whether we learn to abide in this state through meditation, Dream Yoga, walking, washing the dishes, or an NDE, it is still the same essence. All beings possess the seed of enlightenment through the essence of the mind (Nyima Rinpoche, 2003, p. 116). So why should we not all have a chance at reaching enlightenment?

One of the greatest Tibetan masters of all time, Milarepa, said that “The Dharma-Kaya of thine own mind thou shalt see; and seeing that, thou shalt have seen the All – The Vision Infinite, the Round of Death and Birth and the State of Freedom” (Evans-Wentz, 2004, p. 82). The point of enlightenment is to see through the illusion, to attain the insight of emptiness beyond the concepts of the mind. Inseparable from emptiness is luminosity, the presence of what is real (Fremantle, 2000, p. xvi).

The essence of this luminous light is love. It is by “the power of our devotion” we enter the door of Nirmanakaya (Nyima Rinpoche, 2003, p. 148), which can be interpreted as if it is by the power of love that we become enlightened. By remembering love, we become love, and so we become liberated into the light. By recognizing our true nature to be love, we merge with the light in a blissful sensation. Having had this experience before, many NDErs feel they know this love, and they feel confident that this is where they will go when they die.

According to the Tibetan Book of the Dead, death causes the dreamer to awaken to a reality of love and compassion. In the NDE, some people experience a homecoming in which all knowledge is revealed, and this “secret” of the universe is love:

> The central message that the near-death experiencers bring back from their encounter with death is exactly the same as that of Buddha and the bardo teachings: that the essential and most important qualities in life are love and knowledge, compassion and wisdom. (Sogyal, 1992, p. 332)

In this respect, both the NDE and the Tibetan Book of the Dead seem to focus not on death, but on life, on how we live our lives.

I suggest further research on what aspects of NDEs precipitate change in the lives of the experiencers. Atwater found the number of NDErs who have been affected in a “significant” or “radical” way to be
79 percent (Atwater, 2000, p. 211). What insight revealed in the NDE brings about this change? What force is it that impacts the NDEr in this profound way?

References


Commentary on “Nondualistic Experiences of Light in Near-Death Experiences and in The Tibetan Book of the Dead”

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ABSTRACT: René Jorgensen's editorial comparing the Clear Light in The Tibetan Book of the Dead (or Bardo Thodol) and the experience of light in some near-death experiences (NDEs) does not adequately acknowledge either the diversity of NDEs or the possibility that the content of The Tibetan Book of the Dead may be metaphorical. Similarities between descriptions of light in some NDEs and descriptions of the Clear Light in The Tibetan Book of the Dead may reflect similar underlying neural mechanisms and does not provide validation for either description. Any relevance of these descriptions to enlightenment is speculative.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience; The Tibetan Book of the Dead; light; Clear Light; enlightenment; liberation.

This commentary is in response to René Jorgensen’s guest editorial, “Nondualistic Experiences of Light in Near-Death Experiences and in The Tibetan Book of the Dead.” In the abstract, Jorgensen wrote that he would compare the Clear Light in The Tibetan Book of the Dead (or Bardo Thodol) and in near-death experiences (NDEs), and that this comparison will give an answer to the question whether the NDE is similar to the Clear Light of the Ground Luminosity.

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While discussion on this point is certainly within the scope of the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, the specific approach taken here is weakened by Jorgensen's emphasis on his own near-death experience, and not enough consideration of excerpts from other firsthand accounts of NDEs. Although he does quote many published accounts, Jorgensen draws his conclusions by placing too much reliance on the convergence between his own experiences and Tibetan Buddhist teachings. A better frame of reference would be “typical” NDEs, as they appear in several cultures. For example, in Thailand, a Buddhist country where the *Bardo Thodol* is almost unknown, most NDEs feature messengers from the underworld and do not make references to “The Light,” although it does appear frequently in occidental NDEs and in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Comparisons of NDEs to the “Grand Luminosity” will uncover similarities, but they will probably be culture-specific ones. There are too many accounts of NDEs, especially “hellish” experiences, that bear no similarities to *Bardo Thodol* episodes for it to be taken as a model for the workings of NDEs.

Although phenomena described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* can indeed be found in many NDE accounts, it must be born in mind that *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a scripture, one authored by a single known individual, Padmasambhava. Because it is presumed that the book is not based on firsthand accounts of postmortem experiences, it has no compelling relevance to subjective experience occurring following clinical death. As such, it offers no evidence in the usual sense of the word. Rather, it can only inspire speculation. The possibility remains that *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a metaphorical document, and that similarities in the “Light experience” described in both sources is coincidence. There is also the possibility that these experiences are composed of the meditation experiences of the Padmasambhava, who equated them with postmortem experiences. Still another possibility is that it is a “channeled” text, not unlike the *Book of Mormon* or the *Quran*, and has no more claim to truth than any other individual scripture.

There is no evidence that *bardos* even exist; or rather there is as much evidence for the existence of *bardos* as there is for heaven and hell. Even though there are hellish near-death experiences, and these experiences may provide the basis for a meme consisting of belief in eternal constant torture, that does not mean that hell, as understood in Christian tradition, is a common experience after death. Christian
belief in the Day of Judgment may reflect a life review, but that does not mean that life reviews function to pass judgment. I am not saying that the *bardos* do not exist, but only that an argument for their existence is called for, and that Jorgensen’s paper does not make one.

There are many contexts in which light is discussed in Buddhism, and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is only one. Jorgensen does indeed make reference to *Dharmakaya*, which is the name given for the experience of Clear Light when it occurs during meditation, as well as for the state of consciousness in which it happens. I am quite willing to accept that this is the same as the Clear Light that occurs in near-death experiences. I accept this not only because the descriptions match, but more because it seems probable that the underlying neural mechanisms are the same, a suggestion that gains credence from the observation that “The Light” has been reported from many other contexts, including meditation, hyperventilation, twilight sleep states, and others.

The purpose of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is to help people achieve enlightenment after they have died. Jorgensen implies that people are not liberated in the course of NDEs because they either “fail to recognize the Clear Light, or because they are not able to remain in its continuity.” Perhaps enlightenment is possible during near-death experiences, but if so, introducing the subject into the peer-reviewed literature should entail a reasonable definition for the term “enlightenment,” as well as an argument, based on secular evidence, in favor of its existence. Here, Jorgensen simply assumes that there is such thing as enlightenment, expects his reader to agree, and introduces questions that will make little sense for anyone who does not share the author’s religious orientation.

Jorgensen wrote that he saw similarities between his own experiences and the contents of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and appears to have accepted that the purpose of the *bardos* is to facilitate enlightenment, and then imposes the same idea on near-death experiences. An alternative may be that the “purpose” of NDEs is to contribute somehow to our survival as a species. The suggested role for enlightenment in his hypothesis makes it distinctly teleological.

In addition, the author assumes the existence of an “ultimate reality.” While there might be something for which that label is appropriate, its existence should be demonstrated, or it should be explicitly labeled as an assumption or a postulate.
Jorgensen's primary theme, that of comparing descriptions of the Clear Light in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* with descriptions of "the Light" in NDEs, is a good and valid theme. However, his paper was concerned with other issues, requiring references to nonduality, ultimate reality, liberation, and other categories. Although these are well established in Buddhism, they have yet to be demonstrated in any meaningful way for the near-death research community.

Using religious ideas as postulates, as is done here, blurs the distinction between scientific method (the source for scientific ideas) and faith, visions, scriptures, and the other sources for religious ideas. I believe that these distinctions should be maintained, and that losing these distinctions poses a greater risk to near-death studies than to any other field in the sciences, precisely because near-death experiences are so very close to the "heart" of religions. Indeed, all popular religions have teachers who say that the religious life is one that prepares one for death. The study of the experiences that actually occur at death has far-reaching implications for the world's traditional religions, though these implications may differ from one religion to the next.
Kongo Near-Death Experiences: Cross-Cultural Patterns

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ABSTRACT: Analysis of eight Kongo near-death experiences (NDEs) from Central Africa supports the argument that universal features exist within this experiential form. Respondents described leaving their bodies and journeying to afterlife realms, encountering boundaries, and communicating with spiritual beings. Some accounts reveal culturally specific elements, implying that expectations shape perceptions. NDEs seem related to shamanism, humankind's first religious form, since NDEs contain the same elements as waking visions unrelated to the threat of death. Comparisons of Kongo accounts with two Basuto narratives from Southern Africa extend this argument. The theory that NDEs have a shamanic basis has evolutionary implications since shamanism provides greater survival advantages to those with genes allowing dissociation, hypnotic capacity, and religiosity. Shamanic healing, practiced over many millennia, would have increased the frequency of those genes.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience; Kongo; Congo; shamanism; ritual healing theory.

Comparisons of near-death experience (NDE) accounts from North America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, India, Asia, and the Pacific allow insights into core features of NDEs (Becker, 1981, 1984; Kellehear, 1996, 2001; McClendon, 1991, 1994, 2006a, 2006b; Murphy, 2001; Wade, 2003; Zaleski, 1987). Researchers have generally agreed that NDEs have universal core features, are shaped by expectation and culture, and have transformational capacities (Fox, 2003; Greyson, 2000; Kellehear, 1996; Moody, 1975; Moody and Perry, 1988;
Morse and Perry, 1992; Ring, 1980, 1984; Sutherland, 1992). Comparisons of NDE reports over many eras reveal that culturally specific elements and transformational impacts vary over time (McClenon, 1991, 1994; Zaleski, 1987).

This study contributes to this body of knowledge by discussing eight Kongo NDE accounts from Central Africa and comparing these texts to two Basuto NDEs from Southern Africa. Analysis supports the argument that NDEs have physiological bases parallel to those generating shamanic visions. This does not mean that NDEs are "invalid" or do not reflect spiritual realities; such arguments are beyond the scope of historical or textural analysis.

*Kongo* refers to ethnic groups, the BaKongo or people of the Kongo, prevalent within an area divided since 1895 among the Republic of Congo, formerly French Congo; the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly Zaire, and before that, Belgian Congo; and Angola, with Cabinda, formerly a Portuguese colony. The term *Congo* refers to these geographical areas. The history of the BaKongo spans eras of severe deprivation and social crisis associated with slavery systems, colonial exploitation, and postcolonial social and economic crisis. Many generations prior to European contact experienced reductions of population of 50 percent or more due to drought (Miller, 1988). Encounters with the Portuguese, beginning in 1482, led to a merchant capitalist era and destabilizing, exploitative slave trade (Edgerton, 2002; Miller, 1988). Creation of the Free Congo State (1885–1908) by King Leopold II of Belgium resulted in the death of about 10 million people, half the indigenous population. Belgian and French colonial rule led to continued social instability, exploitation, and economic underdevelopment (Edgerton, 2002; Forbath, 1977; Hochschild, 1998). Independence in 1960 brought tyranny, corruption, police brutality, hunger, malnutrition, civil wars, and ever-shorter life expectancy (Edgerton, 2000).

**Indigenous Religions**

John Kelly Thornton (2002) mentioned two NDEs, the first collected by Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi, a Portuguese Capuchin friar who arrived in the Congo in 1654. Cavazzi told of "a woman who had been sacrificed, but returned from the dead to report that her services in the Other World were not needed" (Thornton, 2002, p. 75). The second story was heard by Swedish-American Amandus Johnson, who carried out ethnographic work in Angola between 1922 and 1924:
In 1922, Amandus Johnson heard stories, said to have been first told by people who had “risen from the dead,” who described the land of the dead called Kalunga, ruled by Soba Kalunga, where those judged worthy were admitted after their death. (Thornton, 2002, p. 75)

Thornton (2002) did not otherwise discuss NDEs, but provided these cases to illustrate why BaKongo believed in an afterlife. This line of argument coincides with David Hufford’s (1982) experiential source theory, the idea that folk religions are shaped by the firsthand anomalous experiences people tell one another. Folk religious beliefs are passed down over many generations, yet are continually recreated orally by people talking to each other. People describe apparitions, paranormal dreams, waking extrasensory perceptions, out-of-body and near-death experiences, psychokinesis, and spiritual healing—perceptions creating beliefs in spirits, souls, life after death, and magical abilities (McClenon, 1994, 2000, 2002a, 2002b).

Portuguese explorers first encountered the BaKongo in 1482. The Kingdom of Kongo, founded in the 14th century, was a complex, hierarchical society whose religion reflected its structure. BaKongo believed that a powerful deity governed the universe, corresponding to their king, who had the power to execute people. Their society also supported magical practitioners who performed a variety of supernatural tasks for the general good. Some of these practitioners provided protection from witches or sorcerers who used magic for evil purposes. Although Portuguese explorers converted many BaKongo to Christianity soon after first contact, indigenous beliefs remained prevalent and, over time, the impact of Portuguese Christianity declined.

The previously mentioned 17th-century Kongo NDE account mirrored popular conceptions of the indigenous afterlife, which, although differing among localities, portrayed it as similar to life before death. As with medieval Chinese and European NDEs, the BaKongo believed in a special land, governed by a particular ruler, with entrance to the land dependent on a judge’s decision, concepts reflecting earthly political and social structures.

Heavenly realms developed by medieval societies, whether European, Asian, or African, differed from those of hunter-gatherers. Hunter-gatherer NDEs, such as those discussed by Allen Kellehear (1996), included cosmic geographies but lacked hierarchical social structures. The hunter-gatherer NDEr traveled to a distant land of the afterlife, a domain corresponding to the experiencer’s Earthly realm. This experience was parallel to a shamanic vision in which the shaman, in
trance, visits the spirit world. Some Kongo NDEs had hunter-gatherer forms, but others included the idea of a judge who determined those to be admitted to the heavenly realm.

Two non-Christian Kongo NDEs, collected in the 20th century, tended to be equivalent to shamanic visions in that they did not mention hierarchical structures but provided information valuable for healing. One experiencer reported:

I was a young man with two children. Then, in one month, four deaths occurred in my clan. In the next month there were five deaths. I became ill next, and when I died, I found myself at the bank of the Zaire River [va simu Nzadi]. Across the river several people appeared and said, “you must not die; there are too many orphans to care for.” They told me about three plants, which cure women suffering from barrenness. When I awoke from my death, I vomited peppers, which to this day I do not eat. (Janzen, 1978, p. 196)

This story includes the idea of a “barrier,” in this case the river bank, common within some NDEs. The NDEr was assigned a particular mission, in this case care for orphans, and provided with medical information, elements common within shamanic visions.

The second story was not actually an NDE but a vision associated with death with a form typically included within the NDE literature. This account also illustrated similarities between NDEs and shamanic visions:

I was out tapping palm wine when word reached me that my wife, away at a funeral feast in a nearby village, had succumbed. I was dumbfounded, and in disbelief I set out to fetch her body. Suddenly a voice – like the voice of God – spoke. I beheld a beautiful garden, and beside the path, three plants. The voice told me to take the plants, for they would raise my wife. I took them, and raised her with them. Suddenly, I knew all the plants of the forest. (Janzen, 1978, p. 197)

This account exemplified a form of shamanic calling or initiation. The experiencer traveled to an “otherworldly” realm and gained information valuable for treating the living, and as a result became able to perform shamanic roles.

**Christian NDEs**

The introduction of Christianity by Portuguese missionaries brought about a religious system that integrated Christian concepts
into existing indigenous paradigms. Due to the lack of priests, Christianity diminished in importance until the 1800s, when Christian missionaries reintroduced their religion. In 1921, Simon Kimbangu, a BaKongo teacher, launched what eventually became the Kimbanguist Church, an indigenous form of Christianity based on his spiritual healings and visions. After only a few months, Kimbangu was arrested by the colonial government and sentenced to death, a sentence commuted to life imprisonment. Although he was incarcerated for the remaining 30 years of his life, his movement grew and presently includes more than a million members. After independence from the colonial powers in 1960, officials relaxed the ban on innovative religions and many “prophetic” churches were launched. Typically, prophets demonstrated their authenticity through visionary experience and spiritual healing (Andersson, 1958; Edgerton, 2002).

Many prophetic visions had NDE forms. Wyatt MacGaffey provided an example, taken from a prophet’s text:

In 1966, I fell into a coma, and people brought blankets for my funeral; but then I saw a bright, dazzling light, heard a heavenly choir singing No. 461 ["Many troubles here on earth, we suffer from sicknesses, our tears pour down O Spirit, come to help us!"], and I awoke to find that I had acquired exceptional intelligence, so that no witch could get past me. (MacGaffey, 1983, p. 211)

Such experiences triggered profound beliefs, sufficient to launch the visionary’s career as a prophet. These prophets devised ideologies and rituals that fit the indigenous folk beliefs of their Christian congregations. This often included witchcraft beliefs: the prophet’s experiences granted power to detect and combat witches.

Simon Bockie’s (1993) book, Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief, explained why modern Kongo Christians believe as they do, combining indigenous and Christian beliefs. His text included four NDE-type experiences. The first included four NDE core features: cosmic terrain, encountering others, judgment, and return to the body:

I do not know the time I left this world. According to what I was told by my “mourners,” I stopped breathing around 9:00 in the morning and began breathing again around 4:00 or 5:00 in the afternoon. In the meantime I was going somewhere but had no idea of my final destination. I was walking very fast. I saw different things: mountains, trees, grass, palm trees, and people all over the road who were going in the same direction I was going. I saw nobody returning from where we were going. Some were just sitting by the
side of the road not knowing what to do. Others were still hanging on at a snail’s pace: they were very tired but could not get help from anyone. Everyone was concerned with his own situation. There was no sympathy for others.

As I was physically strong, I kept speeding up. The men and women I saw were ordinary people. It was a long journey. Finally, I arrived at a summitless mountain, that is, a huge mountain reaching up beyond human sight or estimation. Hundreds of people were just lying down there because they did not know what to do next. Suddenly, I became depressed myself, but a moment later the name of Jesus Christ came to my mind. Without wasting time, I cried out lustily: “Jesus, help me!”

With his help I jumped over the top of the mountain and surprisingly found myself in front of a group of individuals who had nkanda wamoyo, the book of life. To be admitted to that world, the name must be found in that huge book. Before being allowed to pass, the name must first be checked and even when it is written in the book, they are to be sure that indeed the individual’s time to go there has come. They speak to everyone in his mother tongue. I was amazed to be asked in Kikongo with a Kingoyi accent, “Nki Wizidi?” (Why are you here?). ... I honestly said that I did not know how I got there. My whole body was hurting and suddenly it cooled off and I saw myself in the road which had led me to this place.

They checked my name in nkanda wamoyo. It was there but, unexpectedly, they told me that though my name was there it was not my time to go. They suggested that I return where I came from, but I was less than enthusiastic about their idea. My reluctance was perhaps due to the fact that I did not have enough strength to walk back the same distance. Just as I was having second thoughts, one of them said, “Tala mwan’ aku Marie telamane yandi mosi mukutomba” (Look, your daughter Mary is standing helplessly alone looking for you). She was just one year old. Turning my head to see my daughter, I suddenly found myself back in the middle of a weeping crowd. Completely surprised, I wanted to ask them why they were wailing, but could not. ... [Later] I told them that contrary to what they thought, I was not dead but had gone somewhere I did not myself know. They were incredibly amazed and awed. (Bockie, 1993, p. 88)

The respondent mentioned the “book of life,” a phrase noted in another Kongo NDE. Christianity introduced and emphasized literacy among the BaKongo and books are an important cultural introduction. Bockie noted that this particular respondent, although a Christian, firmly maintained his traditional beliefs. The man’s NDE indicated that, as expected by many BaKongo, indigenous beliefs did not prevent Christians from being accepted into heaven, an assertion less frequently advocated by European missionaries.

Bockie (1993) provided other NDE cases illustrating how the experiencer’s culture may have shaped perceptions. One NDEr had
converted to a Christian sect that regarded tithing as particularly important:

Even as the doctor spoke, the man stopped breathing. Minutes later, his body was cold. Alone now, the wife began to weep until her eyes were red and swollen. She spent most of the night beside her husband... [He awoke to] ask his wife why she was crying. He just told her that he had been in a strange but peaceful world. He was walking very fast without knowing where he was going. Though the road was very wide, it was more difficult to walk than one would wish, because there were too many people going in the same direction. He did not talk to any of them. After walking for a long time, he found himself in front of a huge door with Jesus standing in the middle. Jesus greeting him and told him that he was expecting him that night, but unfortunately he could not let him in as his record of monthly offering to the church (*kalati kia minkayulu*) was not up to date. Jesus then ordered him to return and pay his due to the church before being admitted to this new world. It must be noted that the religious sect to which he belonged is very strict regarding offering to the church. He was disappointed to leave the paradisal atmosphere he was already enjoying. But had he the power to argue with Jesus? Looking back, all he saw was his wife weeping. He was quite confused; while it had taken hours to get there, it did not take him a minute to return to this room at the hospital. He begged his wife to go home and get his monthly record. ... She was accompanied by tata Aaron Wanimbu, a *mbikudi* (literally, prophet) from the same religious sect, who lived near the hospital. They went to the house to get the offering record. After tata Wanimbu paid with his own money what the “returnee” owed the church, they went back to the hospital where the husband was eagerly awaiting his record of offering. Tata Wanimbu handed it to him, and in a matter of minutes he was dead, to everyone’s amazement. (Bockie, 1993, pp. 92–93)

This story illustrated culturally specific characteristics. Within the vision, Jesus demanded payment of the monthly offering, an action supporting the sect’s belief in tithing, behavior considered less important among other denominations.

Bockie’s final case illustrated how experiences may draw on folk beliefs while failing to coincide exactly with the experiencer’s preconceptions:

She was a devoted Christian even before her first death. This death came as a surprise. She became briefly sick and died. ... As one point she was sleeping, but she was not positive whether it was at this time that she left this world or the “unknown.” ... All of a sudden she was enroute to her final destiny without, however, being aware of it. As her existence was never interrupted, she rejected the use of the verb “to die” in our talk because, as she often put it, “How can I claim that I
was dead when in reality I never was? I moved from one place [world] to the other without any interruption. It was an automatic move." On her way she saw countless numbers of people heading in the same direction. She saw hardly anyone who was resting. What she saw did not impress her, for it was the same kind of scene she had always known in her lifetime; that is why she did not think the spiritual world is in the sky, as Christianity teaches.

Walking as fast as she could, she finally arrived at a place where she was unable to move any further. It was the end of the road. People there were holding nkanda wa moyo, the book of life. As her name was in the book, she was allowed to pass. She found herself in the middle of the most beautiful city; it was very clean. All the houses were small but beautiful. To obtain the key to her room, she was referred to a man named Abraham and then to a certain Peter, who was to give her the room. She had hardly spoken to Peter when he told her that the room he was supposed to give her was already reserved for another newcomer. He then asked her how she had gotten there, since it was not yet her time. She could not tell him anything, for she did not know herself how she had gotten there, that is, she had not part in it. But Peter would not listen. He urged her to return to where she had come from. Captivated by the beauty of the city, she begged him not to send her back. But it was to no avail. When he invited her to look back, suddenly all she could see was the coffin in which she was being laid down. Surprised, she called out, "Why have you put me in this coffin? I am not dead." The mourners were astonished and speechless. (Bockie, 1993, p. 94)

The NDEr expected some type of demarcation between life and death but found none, indicating that NDEs do not always reflect experiencers' expectations (and do not always have a "border" element). This and the other Kongo NDEs are equivalent to shamanic visions in that they describe otherworldly features in worldly terms; the elements of the spirit world are parallel to those of the Earthly plane. In this regard NDEs are similar to prophetic visions, involving travel to the spiritual world where the experiencer gains insights.

Many prophetic visions do not entail the threat of death but show all the elements of a NDE. For example:

During the night of 8 March 1955, while in a leaden sleep, I heard a voice outside briskly calling, "Isaac." As soon as I replied I saw myself suddenly leaving the house, although the door remained intact. Outside I stood facing a man who said, "Follow me," which I did. On the road we took we entered an immense forest before crossing a very large expanse of grassland in the middle of which I saw a crossroads and a man coming towards us. ... Fixing his eyes on me he said, "Follow me," and I obeyed. On arriving at the top of a small hill he showed me a deep well of very pure and clear water in
which I saw beautiful fish swimming. ... Look, he said, “in this water you will find your good fortune. When you need clothes, you can get them here. When you are hungry or wish to feed strangers, come here.”... My companion led me past the well to where we saw a great river like the Congo ... While he prayed ... a great light opened and I know that he was asking God for the heavenly dew and the blessing on me. ... Then I went a little way and saw a road, and women on the road fetching water, and ... I was astounded. After much thought I grew calm ... I realized that I had seen a vision. Thereupon I went to the house in which I had been sleeping but found the door shut on the inside so that I could not open it. Standing out there in front of the door ... I rapped on the door so firmly and with such a bold air that my friend opened it without asking me whence I came. I went back to bed. (Janzen and MacGaffey, 1974, p. 66)

This account described travel to otherworldly realms but made no mention of death. Demarcation between physical and spiritual travel was unclear since the respondent later found himself, in a normal state of mind, outside his locked house, suggesting that he physically traveled to an actual place.

Mark Fox (2003) tested the hypothesis that crisis NDEs, involving the threat of death, were equivalent to noncrisis accounts, where the threat of death was not present. He identified 32 crisis cases and 59 noncrisis cases in his sample of 91 “NDE-like” British accounts. He determined that “the average number of Moody’s original fifteen NDE elements in the crisis and non-crisis accounts examined were 3.3 and 2.9 respectively, a difference of only 0.4” (Fox, 2003, p. 325). His data implied that NDEs do not require physiological processes associated with death. I conducted a similar analysis, comparing 22 crisis experiences to 5 noncrisis experiences (McClenon, 2006a, 2006b). In parallel fashion, the data revealed little difference regarding frequency of NDE features between samples. These studies imply that the special condition of the threat of death contributes to labeling NDEs but does not define their nature.

The Congo cases coincided with these findings. The two “noncrisis” cases, the man whose wife was dying during his vision and the previous case, had NDE elements equivalent to those within the crisis cases.

**Basuto (Southern African) Cases**

Robert Keable, a British missionary among the Basuto in Southern Africa before World War I, published various “miraculous” dreams and
NDE accounts. Keable was assisted by a "catechist," an African familiar with the Christian doctrines, who described the following events:

The catechist was summoned to a distant village by a man who had been ill, had "died," and had returned to life. The man said that having died, he found himself on an unknown road which he traversed for some time. Presently the road divided, and he hesitated which branch to take. While he hesitated a native came up to him, took him by the arm, and led him along one branch. As he went, our friend became increasingly struck with his guide's villainous countenance, and finally demanded whither they went. "Never you mind," sinisterly replied the guide; "come on." At that the "dead" man became terrified, and cried for help and on his crying, a third person came running across the lands. He was observed to have a cross marked on his brow and at the sight of him the guide fled. The newcomer was much out of breath, explained that the road was the road to hell, and besought our friend to turn back and send for a teacher. He did so, reached the place in which he had first found himself, returned to life, and sent for the catechist. [The catechist did not think the man was sick. He marked a cross on his brow designating him a catechumen — a person prepared to become a Christian.] The man promptly lay down contentedly enough, and that night "died" again. His friends went so far as to make his coffin and dig his grave, and they sent for the catechist to bury him. [The man then returned to life and stated that his cross had vanished — that it was only a temporary designation — that his Christian guide stated he needed baptism.] He ... returned to life, and now reproachful at what he considered a trick that had been played upon him, demanded baptism. [After baptism, he again died and stayed dead.] (Keable, 1921, p. 527)

This account paralleled the NDEs found all over the world that specify a particular action required to enter the heavenly realm. (In the previous story, a church offering was required.) Culturally specific elements were also found in medieval Asian and European NDE accounts; NDErs returned to inform their listeners that specific actions were either required or forbidden. For example, Asians learned during NDEs that chanting sutras, creating images of the Buddha, doing good deeds, or copying scripture granted special merit and alleviated the suffering of deceased relatives; whereas sinful behavior such as hunting and killing animals or collecting debts by force resulted in afterlife punishment (McClenon, 1991, 1994).

A second story involved a "prophet" who died, came back to life, and attracted large crowds. The prophet was not a member of any specific Christian sect but sent his "converts" to Christian missionaries for further instruction:
He lived in a village far removed from Europeans, and in a little-civilized district. He fell ill, and he "died." It was winter, and therefore probably he was "dead" for some three days, for he recovered only when the grave was dug, the coffin made, the food prepared, and the mourners gathered. He sat up suddenly while the old women were discoursing upon him. ... He told the old folk ... where he had been and what he had seen, and they were his first converts.

It seemed to him that he had been dead many years, and the full recital of those years would take much time. He had, for example, come to a river and observed that it was both too full and too deep to cross. On the bank were gathered many souls, and now and again unearthly spirits crossed the river easily, selected one and another, and as easily led them over. Then the prophet (to anticipate) mingled with the crowd, and asked why it was that one and another were selected. Could he not cross? The people one and all glanced at his knees, and told him that not until they were hard from kneeling did he stand any chance of crossing. And thus does the prophet to-day inculcate the duty of prayer.

Once across, after long learning of prayers, he came to make up for lost time by preaching repentance. Like another Isaiah, he confessed that he could not speak; not so much however, because he lips were unclean, but because he was unlearned; and therefore God ordered him to be taught to read. This, therefore, constituted one miraculous sign of his office, for having never learned he now could read. In the hut, on awakening, he immediately demanded a book; and there was none in the village. In a day or two one was procured from the Mission, and at once he opened it and began to read. Such is the universal testimony. Further, he now knows many prayers. Also he had a gift of interpretations. And I was assured by his chaplain that he had performed miracles of healing. (Keable, 1921, pp. 529–530)

Keable (1921) took it upon himself to investigate this case "a year or more" after the NDE:

I tackled the reading "miracle," and the interesting thing was that undoubtedly he could not read much even then. So far as I could discover he could "read" anywhere in the Gospels, the commoner Epistles, and some of the psalms with ease and fluency. Given a place, he would glance at it and then begin. If you stopped him, however, he knew at what point in the print he had been arrested. In the Old Testament, with the exception of such passages as Genesis I or Isaiah LI, he went much more slowly. He stumbled hopelessly among the genealogies of Chronicles like a child beginning to read.

This is then, as likely as not, an amazing case of the subliminal memory. As a boy or as a young man, in village after village, he may have been within earshot of the reading of the Scriptures; for converts, who can do so, will sit on the ground and read aloud for hours, and the services of the French Protestant catechists consist
largely of such readings. It must be supposed, then that the whole of these had been stored by him subconsciously, and were now, by a strange circumstance, placed at his normal disposal. (Keable, 1921, pp. 529-531)

Although Keable (1921) “explained” the miraculous element within the prophet’s performance, this account provided another example of a shamanic initiation. The prophet’s story, faith, and reading skills attracted audiences, some of whom were healed. Like a shaman, the prophet’s abilities exceeded those of normal people, inspiring faith in those meeting him. Such performances, inducing hypnotic and placebo effects, benefit those more open to suggestion. Hypnotic suggestions, which do not require listeners to be in trance, have been proven to affect physiological processes including blood flow and brain chemistry. Ritual suggestions are particularly beneficial for alleviating burns, infertility, childbirth complications, and mental disorders (McClenon, 2002a).

According to this “ritual healing theory,” shamanism has had evolutionary impacts (McClenon, 2002a). Over many millennia, people with genes allowing hypnotic and placebo processes benefited from spiritual healing rituals. As a result, these rituals led to increased frequency of “religiosity” genotypes. These genes facilitated hypnotic, dissociative, and anomalous experiences, including NDEs, out-of-body experiences, apparitions, waking extrasensory perceptions, paranormal dreams, and psychokinesis. Although animals seem to perceive apparitions, precognitions, and extrasensory perceptions, Homo sapiens has used ritual trance for healing and, with increasing ability for symbolization, interpreted these episodes linguistically. These interpretations shaped future perceptions. Eventually, humans devised culturally-specific beliefs regarding spirits, souls, life after death, and magical abilities. This is not to say that anomalous experiences such as NDEs are invalid, but that people with dissociative and hypnotic capacities are more likely to perceive such episodes.

The ritual healing theory is open to empirical evaluation. The processes that selected and shaped religiosity genotypes can be studied within the realms of medical research, anthropology, sociology, psychology, folklore studies, and genetic research. The theory argues that spiritual healing practices continue to provide greater benefits to those more open to suggestion. Such people are hypothesized to be more likely to perceive NDEs and other anomalous perceptions. Such episodes continue to generate folk beliefs in spirits,
souls, life after death, and magical abilities – elements that inspire spiritual healing. The Kongo and Basuto cases suggest that folk traditions of all societies contain NDEs shaped by cultural expectations but having similar core features derived from their physiological basis.

References


An 18th Century Near-Death Experience: The Case of George de Benneville

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ABSTRACT: Near-death experiences (NDEs) have been reported since ancient times. Before the advent of modern reporting methods in medicine and the social sciences, the credibility of these accounts was often compromised through editing by church authorities or retelling by secondary sources. The autobiographical account of the NDE of George de Benneville, an 18th-century physician and lay minister, would satisfy the criteria of contemporary near-death researchers. In addition, de Benneville’s life is so well-documented that researchers have confidence in his personal credibility. The hopeful Universalist message in his account is also consistent with the reports of modern-day NDEs. We provide a complete account of de Benneville’s NDE and compare it with both ancient and modern NDEs. We discuss his experiences within the context of comparative religion in general and Universalist Christian theology in particular.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience; Universalist Christianity; religious experiences; afterlife; transpersonal.

Near-death experiences were rarely recorded prior to modern resuscitation techniques, but there is no doubt they have occurred since the dawn of humanity. In his Republic, the ancient Greek philosopher and educator Plato told the story of Er, a man who revived on his funeral pyre and recounted his near-death experience (NDE)
(Plato, 1892/4th century B.C.). In the 1st century, Plutarch recounted the story of Thespies of Soli who died of a blow to the head but revived during his funeral three days later (Plutarch, 1918/1st century). In the 6th century, St. Gregory the Great told the story of a man named Stephen who died but came back to life before his body could be embalmed (Gregory the Great, 1959/6th century). The 8th-century English theologian and scholar the Venerable Bede described the near-death experience of a man named Cunningham or Drythelm who “rose from the dead” in 696 A.D. (Bede, 1907/8th century). In his Ecclesiastical History, Bede also included two deathbed visions with similar themes. All these accounts stressed the necessity of living a righteous life in order to avoid punishment in the afterlife. Plato did not indicate Er’s reputation, but Plutarch stated that Thespies had fallen into living a less-than-sterling life, Gregory wrote that Stephen’s character was mixed, and Bede noted that Cunningham became more religious and entered a monastery after his NDE.

Despite our fascination with these and other examples from ancient and medieval literature and the fact that they sound similar to modern NDE accounts, they are of little use to the modern near-death researcher. One of the most essential criteria for modern near-death research is that the account be an autobiographical or “first-hand” telling of the experience. In her analysis of medieval and modern accounts of otherworld journeys, Carol Zaleski noted, “we cannot simply peel away the literary wrapper and put our hand on an unembellished event. Even when a vision actually did occur, it is likely to have been re-worked many times before being recorded” (Zaleski, 1987, pp. 86–88). She suggested, for example, that the Church would have been eager to insure that these accounts did not contradict “truth” as defined by Church doctrine.

Before the advent of modern medicine and social sciences, there was little value placed on reporting events objectively. This was true for most mystical religious experience in general and near-death experiences in particular. Not until the end of the 19th century was organized research into these fields initiated by the British Society for Psychical Research and, subsequently, its American counterpart.

Against this suspicious background of NDEs interpreted through historians and theologians, we are fortunate to have one 18th-century NDE account that would meet the standards of modern researchers. In 1741, George de Benneville wrote his first-person NDE account. By examining his life and reputation, we hope to show that his NDE can be accepted as authentic and credible.
The Life of George de Benneville

George de Benneville (1703–1793) was a physician and lay minister in Europe and an advocate of the doctrine of Universal Salvation that, in the end of time, all creatures will be restored to what he called “happiness and holiness.” He brought the spirit of German Pietist communities to the new world, principally in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, but he made frequent journeys to the Southern states.

The youngest of nine children born to Huguenot refugees, de Benneville was born and brought up in the British royal court in London, his father being a nobleman from Normandy. His godmother was Queen Anne. After growing up in England, he traveled to France and eventually settled in Germany, where he had his near-death experience at the age of 36, and from whence he emigrated to America in the second quarter of the 18th century, arriving in Philadelphia, but eventually settling and marrying in what is now Berks County, Pennsylvania. He built there a large house that contained a schoolroom for both immigrants and Native American children, a large room used by many religious groups, and a space for his medical practice. He learned and used many herbal remedies from tribes in the area, some of whom often would camp outside his house. He also assisted in the first German language edition of the Bible published in the United States, and put the Bible passages that justified Universal Salvation in red type.

De Benneville believed that there was an essential unity behind every appearance of religious diversity. Thus he was able to incorporate into his medical practice Native American remedies and even some of their symbols and language. In 1757 he and his family moved near Philadelphia, where he continued his medical practice while opening an apothecary shop. He treated the wounded of both sides at the Battle of Germantown in 1777 and even permitted British troops to be buried in his family plot. He died of a stroke in 1793 (De Benneville, 1804; Morgan, 1995, pp 28–33).

The Near-Death Experience of George de Benneville

This is de Benneville's NDE in his own words. The spelling and punctuation are left in their original form.

I felt myself die by degrees, and exactly at midnight I was separated from my body, and saw the people occupied in washing it, according to...
the custom of the country. I had a great desire to be freed from the sight of my body, and immediately I was drawn up as in a cloud, and beheld great wonders where I passed, impossible to be written or expressed. I quickly came to a place which appeared to my eyes as a level plain, so extensive that my sight was not able to reach its limits, filled with all sorts of delightful fruit trees, agreeable to behold, and which sent forth such fragrant odours that all the air was filled as with incense. In this place I found that I had two guardians, one at my right hand and the other at my left, exceeding beautiful beyond expression, whose boundless friendship and love seemed to penetrate through all my inward parts. ... They had wings and resembled angels, having shining bodies and white garments.

He that was at my right hand came before me, and said, "My dear soul and my dear brother, take courage, the most holy trinity hath favored you to be comforted with an everlasting and universal consolation, by discovering to you how, and in what manner, he will restore all his creatures without exception, to the praise of his glory, and their eternal salvation; and you shall be witness of this, and shall rejoice in singing and triumph with all the children of God, therefore as a reward for the friendship and love that you have born for your neighbours, on whose accounts you had many extreme griefs, and shed many tears, which God himself, who shall turn all your griefs to exceeding great gladness." Then he took his place at my right hand. After that the second guardian who was at my left hand appeared before me, and spoke thus; "My dear soul, my dear brother, be of good cheer, thou shalt be strengthened and comforted after your griefs with an universal and eternal consolation. ... You must be prepared to pass through the seven habitations of the damned; be of good courage and prepare yourself to feel something of their sufferings, but be turned inward deeply during the time, and you shall thereby be preserved." Then he took his place at my left hand; immediately we were lifted up in the air, and sometimes after we arrived in a dark obscure place, where nothing but weeping, lamentation, and gnashing of teeth, could be understood. A dreadful place, as being the repository of all sorts of damned souls, under condemnation with the torments, pains, griefs and sufferings which their sins had merited, for each one had his works to follow him in death. All iniquities and sins were reduced to seven classes or habitations: there was an eternal confusion there, that which one made, the other destroyed.

The duellist, in his fire of anger, burns against his enemy, and they pass as a flame and firebrand of hell, one through the other. You might see fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, thieves, the covetous, drunkards, slanderers, ravishers, etc., each laboring and being employed with his sins and iniquities. One might also see all kind of conditions of men, divines, deputies, controvertors, advocates, judges, lawyers, and in a word one might discover whatsoever any of them had done upon earth. In each habitation I discovered that those who were abased and that appeared sorrowful for their sins, were
separated from the others of seven habitations of the damned, where I knew one I had been acquainted with upon earth. I discovered also that he had an habitation among the damned, and that they were able to see the elect from that habitation where he was, but were not able to pass through because there was a great gulph between them, so that all are obliged to dwell where they are.

It is impossible to describe my condition, as I had great compassion towards the sufferers, inasmuch as I had part of their sufferings.

After we had passed through we were lifted up some distance from the place, where we reposed ourselves; and a messenger was sent to us, who watered or refreshed us as with a river of pleasure, saying, eat, my beloved, and drink, my friends, to refresh yourselves after all your toils and pains; my dear soul, and my dear brother, (addressing himself to me) the most holy trinity always works wonders in all times within his poor creatures without exception, and he will order for a time, and half a time, that you shall return into your earthly tabernacle, to publish and to proclaim to the people of the world an universal gospel, that shall restore in its time all the human species without exception to its honor and to the glory of its most holy trinity.... Hallelujah.

Beholding the messenger attentively, I discovered that he had a most glorious body, dressed in a robe whiter than snow, filled with the most exalted love and friendship, joined with the deepest humility which penetrated me through and through, and suddenly there was heard a great multitude of the heavenly host, and the messenger said, as he flew to join the same, with a sweet voice—"Holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and who is to come."

The multitude were innumerable, and there was one who surpassed in grandeur, brightness, beauty, majesty, magnificence and excellence, all the others; even the son of the living God, being the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.

As the multitude approached the glory caused us to fall down, and to adore in spirit and in truth the son of the living God, who marched in the midst of the multitude.

After they had passed us, we were lifted up, and caused to follow them, for the air carried us the way they went, in a different manner than before. Oh! the wonders of our God! When we arrived in the place of the seven habitations of the damned, we could perceive no more darkness, obscurity, pain, torments, lamentations, afflictions, nor gnashing of teeth. All were still and quiet, and an agreeable sweetness appeared through the whole. Then all the heavenly host shouted with one voice and said, "An eternal and everlasting deliverance, an eternal and everlasting restoration, universal and everlasting restitution of all things." Then all the multitude adored the most holy trinity, and sang the song of the Lamb, even the song of the triumph for the victory gained by him, in the most harmonious
manner. And at the end, all the multitude being upon their knees, said with a loud voice, "Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord, God Almighty, just and true are thy ways. Oh! King of Saints."

Presently they passed through the seven habitations of the damned and a multitude were delivered from each, and being clothed in white robes, they followed the heavenly host, praising and glorifying the most high for their deliverance; one might know them amongst the others: they all retired by a different way than that which they came. The messenger then came and conducted us into a most wonderful place, and ordered my two guardians to conduct me into five celestial mansions, where the Lord's elect abide; and then to reconduct me to dwell yet a time, and half a time in my earthly habitation, and to preach to the lower world the universal everlasting gospel; and that the most holy trinity hath a pure universal love towards all the human race, without exception, and to each one in particular; then turning himself towards me he said, my dear soul, my dear brother, thou shalt be favored of the most holy trinity, to be conducted by thy guardians, who shall never leave thee; when thou shalt have need of their counsel, thou needest but to call them, and they shall be day and night present at thy service; they shall conduct thee into five of the heavenly mansions at this time, where thou shalt partake in a certain degree, of the celestial glory as much as thy spirit shall be able to receive, as not being yet sanctified and purified sufficiently, and then thou shalt be reconducted into thine earthly tabernacle, for a time and half a time and shall preach to the lower world the universal everlasting gospel, and that the most holy trinity hath a pure universal love towards all the human race, without exception, and towards each one in particular.

The fountain of grace bless and preserve thee, and cause his face to shine upon and in thee, and enlighten thine understanding both in time and in eternity, Amen. Our knees bending of their own accord, he laid his hand upon my head, and blessed me, and immediately took wing and swiftly fled away.

After that, my guardian conducted me into five celestial habitations, where I discovered many wonders. Some had greater brightness, glory, and majesty than others, and, as the places were, so were the inhabitants; some were clothed in garments whiter then snow; others had transparent bodies, and others again had white bodies resembling crystal. It is impossible to express these things. They were moved by boundless burning love, rising up and then plunging themselves into the deepest humility; all their motions were penetrating, being filled with love and friendship. ... Their actions and manners are strengthened and animated with brightness, being filled with light as with the rays of the sun; it was the fire of heavenly love, which by inflaming all their hearts, causes them all to burn in the same spirit. They have no need of any way of speaking there, but the language and motions of eternal and universal love without words for their actions, their motions speak more than all words. I was then
conducted into five habitations of the elect. At the first, a great multitude came before us with songs to the honor and glory of the most high, and of the victory gained over the damned. They received us with triumph, great zeal, love and friendship, saluting us with profound humility, and conducting us into a large room; there was a great table covered and furnished with all sorts of fruit, not only pleasant to behold, but also exceedingly delicious to the taste.

In the mean time while we were taking our repast, the celestial multitudes formed songs, and sang psalms of praise and thanksgiving to the most holy trinity. After that we were conducted into all the five celestial habitations (that I was to see) where I saw many wonders, impossible to describe. First, many thrones lifted up of inexpressible beauty and magnificence; upon one of these thrones I beheld the royal high priest, surrounded with exceeding great brightness, and clothed in most excellent majesty, being employed in kind intercession before his father, for all the human species, pleading the sufficiency of his blood-shedding to deliver and sanctify a thousand such worlds as ours. All the elect, with the heavenly spirits, joined their intercession with that of their high priest, the only chief king, being reconcilers, saviors, and restorers in the same spirit. This mutual intercession appeared like incense ascending on high into the sanctuary of the Lord. Over against the throne I discovered Adam with Eve, rejoicing in the only mediator between God and men, and adoring together the most holy trinity for the deliverance of their children out of the great miseries and eternal condemnation into which their sin and fall had brought them, and upon their bended knees adoring the only mediator for the intercession he makes in behalf of mankind. Also I beheld a multitude of spirits flying and enflamed with the fire of heavenly love, while we adored, humbled in nothingness, rendering our religious homage to the most high for his intercession and the deliverance of all mankind. Then my guardian, who was at my right hand, coming before me, said thus, "Dear soul, my dear brother, do you see these spirits flying, who are vanished in the spirit of love and gratitude, humbled and self-annihilated as it were, adoring before the throne of grace, and praying the saviour for the intercessions he made for them. These are lately delivered from the infernal prisons; it is from them that the tincture of the blood of Jesus Christ hath been shed even to the last drop, notwithstanding they had dwelt a long time shut up in the place of the damned, under the power of the second death, and have passed thro' many agonies, pains and tribulations. ...." Upon that, I perceived that Adam and Eve approached, and Adam spoke to me after his manner. ... "My dear brother, rejoice with universal and eternal joy, as you are favored with the heavenly visions! it is in this manner that our adorable royal high priest, mediator, and intercessor, shall restore all my descendants to the glory of our God, and their eternal and universal salvation for the kingdom of eternal love hath power sufficient to draw all mankind out of their bondage, and to exclaim and say; O
death, where is thy sting, etc. But my dear brother, this love of our God in Jesus Christ, by the power of his holy spirit, shall not only gain the victory over all the human species, but also surmount or overflow the kingdom of Satan entirely, with all the principalities of the fallen angels, and shall bring them back in their first glory, which they have had in the beginning. I will make all things new, said the Lord of hosts, and the end shall return into its beginning. O my Lord and my God, what great wonders hast thou caused to pass before mine eyes! Who am I, O my God, dust and ashes, an ungrateful and rebellious creature, I should not dare to lift mine eyes towards the heavens if the blood of Jesus Christ thy son did not plead for me. My soul rejoices and is glad, she shouts for joy; O my God, whom I adore, love, and respect; before whom I desire to be without ceasing, self-annihilated at thy feet. O my God and my love, the seraphims and cherubims burning with the fire of thy heavenly love, adore and honor thee; give me thy grace also, O my God, that I may be consumed before thee, while I sing the majesty, glory, and the memory of God, who hath created and redeemed me. I would praise him incessantly, not in shadow or figure, but in reality and truth. I would continue devoted to thee, and always be swallowed up in the ocean of love without a wish to leave it."

Being in this manner conducted into five celestial habitations, I discovered many mysteries, saw many miracles, and beheld the wonders of the most holy trinity among the children, the elect, and heavenly inhabitants, and perceiving how some surpassed others in brightness, light, splendor, majesty, friendship, love, humiliation, and self-abasement, concerning of which things my tongue is too feeble to speak, and my pen to write. I adore the marvelous ways of my God, with all the happy spirits.

Many thrones, palaces, edifices, temples, and buildings were erected in all parts, with fruit trees intermixed, rivers of pleasure gliding along through the celestial land, which appeared like a garden of heaven, even the paradise of God. It is the court of the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, which the eye has not seen nor the ear heard, and which the hearts of men have not received. It is the celestial globe where the New Jerusalem, or Mount Sion, is placed, where the bosom of Abraham is; where the sufferers who came out of their tribulations are refreshed, and rejoice forgetting all their miseries; being come out of their purifications, they are made to rejoice in Sion; O magnificent globe! O thou city of the Great God! stately city of this place! where shall a mortal find convenient phrases to lift out a little of thy glory and splendor? It is the glory and magnificence of the most holy trinity, where God is pleased to manifest himself in his pomp and beauty. The blessed angels have their employment in serving God; they compose the court of the Great King. O my God, I am not able to express that which penetrates me, of the grandeur, magnificence, splendor, pomp and majesty of thy dwellings, or of the inhabitants in those transparent places, hallelujah and victory for ever. ... AMEN.
Then my guardian took me up, and reconducted me to the house from whence I came, where I perceived the people assembled, and discovering my body in the coffin, I was reunited with the same, and found myself lodged within my earthly tabernacle, and coming to myself, I knew my dear brother Marsey, and many others, who gave me an account of my being twenty-five hours in the coffin, and seventeen hours before they put me in the coffin, which altogether made forty-two hours; to me they seemed as many years; beginning then to preach the universal gospel, I was presently put in prison, but soon set at liberty again. I visited all my brethren, preaching the gospel and taking leave of them all, because that my God and Sovereign Good called me to go to America and preach the gospel there. I took my departure for the same in the 38th year of my age, and it is forty-one years since I first arrived here. The 28th of July next, 1782, I shall be 79 years of age. Blessed be the name of the Lord forever.

The Visions of George de Benneville

The NDE is considered to be one category of mystical experience with an easily identifiable “trigger,” that of dying briefly. Other mystical experiences include visionary experiences, out-of-body experiences, deathbed visions, and after-death communications. Modern studies have shown that about 40 percent of the populations of developed countries have had mystical experiences (Hay, 1987; Wood, 1989). There is some evidence that the number increases to as high as 65 percent when subjects are interviewed personally rather than being queried by written questionnaire (Hardy, 1979).

A legitimate question often asked is how we know these people are not simply delusional. Social scientists have now accumulated enough data to state that 5 percent of the population experiences psychosis in their lifetime (Wood and Wood, 1999). In comparing the relatively small percentage of psychotic persons to the number reporting mystical experience, the mystics clearly predominate. While visionary experience is more commonly identified with mental illness than nonvisionary mystical experience, research in the 19th century, as well as research in the 20th century using random samples, showed the majority of persons experiencing hallucinations were not psychotic (Bentall, 2000; West 1995). In reviewing de Benneville’s personal history carefully, there is no evidence that his visions were the result of psychosis.
In addition to his NDE, de Benneville had visionary experiences. His first vision occurred as a teenager while he was changing his shirt at a ball. In his words, he “fell into a fainting fit and had a vision of myself burning as a firebrand in hell” (1804, p. 7). After an interval of 15 months, he had a vision of Jesus revealing to him that his sins were forgiven and that all people would receive salvation. When he began to talk about this vision to others, his story was brought to the attention of French Calvinist ministers who were in exile with him. He said, “They held to predestination, and I held to the restoration of all souls” (1804, p. 12). He was cast out of the Calvinist church, his own personal religious experience having trumped church authority. As we still find today, persons whose mystical religious experience is accepted by their church community tend to remain within it, while those whose congregations condemn them exit rather than deny the truth of their own experience.

De Benneville’s next religious experience was at age 17 years when he heard an internal voice “calling me to go to France to preach the Gospel” (1804, p. 13). His fourth experience, which occurred during the time he was preaching on the European continent, was a vision of heaven where people were worshiping God. He reported falling ill in his late 30s and suffering a high fever from “a consumptive disorder” (1804, p. 18). He again had visions of a fine plain filled with fruit trees and inhabitants who were “clothed in garments white as snow” (1804, p. 19). This is the only one of his visionary accounts considered to be compromised because of the presence of fever. He subsequently died and had a NDE, as related above.

Judgment or Life Review in World Religions

De Benneville’s NDE is similar to many pre-modern NDEs in which the person died but revived near the time of burial. The theological idea that humans face Judgment of Deeds, often called a life review in NDE accounts, dates to ancient Egypt. It appeared in the instruction for Merikare more than 4,100 years ago (Assmann, 2005). Coexisting with this Judgment were the Pyramid Texts and Book of the Dead, which provided the deceased with magical instruction to insure a positive outcome (Spence, 1990/1915). We do not claim that these Egyptian texts were based on NDEs or mystical religious experiences; they were simply Egyptian theology with a familiar “ring.” In Zoroastrianism, judgment is determined by weighing good deeds
against bad deeds. Those who do not measure up are purified in Hell until they “shape up” (Vincent, 1999, pp. 46-47), after which all are saved.

In both Plato’s and Plutarch’s accounts, the NDErs witnessed Judgment, Heaven, and Hell; after a period of time, the deceased were reincarnated (Plato, 1892/4th century B.C.; Plutarch, 1918/1st century). These Greco-Roman accounts echoed the theology of the Eastern religions – Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain (Bhattacharji, 1987; Evans-Wentz, 1957; Merh, 1996; Nigosian, 2000; Vincent, 2005). In the Hindu religion and its derivatives, there is Judgment, followed by an intermediate state of Heaven or Hell that is not permanent; reincarnation follows for all except the few who are pure. Reincarnation has only begun to be studied objectively, but Ian Stevenson and Jim Tucker at the University of Virginia Medical School and their colleagues have gathered 2,500 contemporary cases suggestive of reincarnation (Tucker, 2005).

In the Christian account of Gregory the Great, a man named Stephen was taken before the heavenly judge and had his case dismissed because of “mistaken identity.” Curiously, his neighbor died during the same hour, also with the name of Stephen (Gregory the Great, 1959/6th century). This kind of error is commonly reported in Hindu NDEs (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986). While he was dead, Stephen found himself on a bridge with Heaven on one side and Hell below the bridge. He observed that the unjust would slip off the bridge and fall into Hell (Gregory the Great, 1959/6th century). This kind of “bridge” imagery is also present in Zoroastrianism and Shiite Islam (Moulton, 1980). In Bede’s account, the Christian NDER was shown Heaven, Hell, and purgatory (Bede, 1997). As mentioned before, the Medieval Church often edited accounts to conform to official dogma. Gregory the Great admitted as much when he wrote, “God allows some souls to return to their bodies shortly after death, so that the sight of hell may at last teach them to fear eternal punishments in which words alone could not make them believe” (Gregory the Great, 1959/6th century, p 237).

**From Judgment to Universal Salvation**

In de Benneville’s NDE, we have a first-hand account from a reliable individual. In it, he asserted the primary tenet of Universalism, that after purification in Hell, all will be saved. De Benneville’s NDE
reinforced his earlier vision that caused his abrupt change in theology from Calvinist predestination to Christian Universalism. De Benneville's NDE conformed to modern NDEs in two important aspects: NDEs are largely positive in nature, and those who initially find themselves in Hell can reverse their fortune by calling out to God (Vincent, 2003). In fact, de Benneville's account was compatible with the contemporary account of George Ritchie (1998) who recounted that in the hellish regions of his NDE, angels were trying to help those in Hell. In his vision, Ritchie was told by Jesus, “You are right, for I, Love, be lifted up, I shall draw all men [people] unto Me” (p. 44). This is virtually identical wording to the great Universalist Biblical passage of John 12:32: “and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (RSV).

The first person to speak of Universal Salvation was not a Christian, but rather Zoroaster, the ancient Persian prophet of the Magi, who lived about 1200 B.C. (Vincent, 1999). Zoroaster said that God based salvation on good deeds in this life; Christian Universalism added Jesus’s message of forgiveness (Matthew 6:12–15). Christian Universalism is supported by numerous verses in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament (Vincent, 2005). The earliest theological writing on Christian Universalism was that of St. Clement of Alexandria in the 2nd century. His pupil, Origen, was Universalism’s most influential theorist (Vincent, 2005).

In the 7th century, Universalism was dealt a blow when Origen’s theology was condemned by the Roman Catholic Church, although it remained viable in the Churches of the East. In the West, Universalism was relegated to the realm of mystics until the Reformation (Hanson, 1899). Julian of Norwich was one of the best examples of this. Although her Universalist mystical experiences of God and Jesus were contrary to Roman Catholic doctrine, she wrote that both her experiences and Catholic teaching must be true in some sense, a “dance” that enabled her to keep in the good graces of the Catholic Church (Hick, 1999).

In the Church of the East, Universalism continued, and parts of the Universalist teachings of Theodore of Mopsuestia are still in the liturgy of the Nestorian Church today (Hanson, 1999). Christian Universalism was also found in the Chapter 60 of the Book of the Bee, written by the 13th-century bishop Solomon of Basra. With the Renaissance, there was a revival of Universalist Christianity in the West, and for a time in the 19th century, the Universalist Church of
America was the 6th largest denomination in the United States. It survives today in the now interfaith Unitarian Universalist Association, of which Universalist Christians (like the authors) are only a small remnant. In the 21st century, Christian Universalism is advocated by a wide variety of Christians from post-Vatican II Catholics to Primitive Baptists (Vincent, 2005, p 5).

Discussion

De Benneville's NDE was preceded by a mystical religious experience in the form of a vision that was Universalist in nature, a theological concept completely contrary to his religious upbringing. Departing from the Calvinist view of salvation for a few "elect," de Benneville spent the remainder of his life as a minister and physician witnessing for his understanding of a God too good to condemn anyone to Eternal Hell. His reversal was as dramatic a change as that of St. Paul (I Corinthians 15:3–8; Galatians 1:13–16) who went from persecuting Christians to being one of Christianity's major evangelists.

In recent years, there has been much documentation that both mystical religious experiences and NDEs change the lives of those who have them in positive and lasting ways (Greyson, 2000; Hay, 1987). In de Benneville's autobiography, we have a credible person's account of his mystical experiences and NDE. His life reflected his belief in God's Universal, unconditional love for all.

References


Six Major Challenges Faced by Near-Death Experiencers

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ABSTRACT: This article sheds more light on some of the unique personal and spiritual challenges that people face following near-death experiences (NDEs). The six challenges and suggested remedies described here were developed from more than 185 written responses to two questions, regarding challenges after NDEs and remedies, gathered from 25 attendees at the first retreat for NDErs held by the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), in April, 2006. We hope that this informal study will stimulate more formal research into the challenges and unique needs faced by all NDErs and the development of resources to assist experiencers in coping with them.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience; near-death experiencer; psychological challenges; spiritual challenges; integration; aftereffects; transformation.

The first retreat for near-death experiencers (NDErs) organized by the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) was held at Mercy Center in St. Louis, Missouri, April 17–20, 2006. The
Retreat Participants and Study Questions

The retreat participants included 25 near-death experiencers from 15 different states. In a survey following the retreat, 12 of the 23 participants responding reported having had more than one NDE: 6 reported two NDEs each and 6 others reported three each. Three of the respondents reported suicide-related NDEs. Five had NDEs as children, of whom two had sudden recall of their childhood NDEs many years later as adults. One respondent reported a predominantly unpleasant (but not terrifying) experience during the second of her three NDEs, which occurred during attempted suicide in an attempt to return to where she had been in her first NDE. Two respondents stated that at the beginning of their NDEs they were fearful of what was happening. The remaining NDEs were described as “heavenly,” “fulfilling,” “transcendent,” or “positive” experiences. Half of the respondents had experienced their NDEs 20 or more years prior to the retreat. The most recent NDE was 2 years prior to the retreat, the oldest 55 years prior, in childhood but never forgotten; that participant reported feeling profoundly impacted by the NDE for her entire life.

Seventeen respondents (74 percent) considered themselves well-adjusted, having integrated their NDEs into their lives. They had to face these challenges when few, if any, resources were available to assist them, yet they managed not just to overcome these challenges, but to establish careers and/or become active in charitable work, social causes, and spiritual service.

With so many near-death experiencers together in one place, coming from all over the United States and representing a wide variety of backgrounds, organizers agreed that this would be a unique opportu-
nity to collect valid information in the experiencers’ own words that could be translated into useful tools to aid NDErs in the integration of the most transformative event in their lives. We therefore asked each of the 25 participants two questions: (a) what were the struggles or challenges that you faced following your NDE? and (b) what would help you or did help you with these challenges? The challenges described below took years to assimilate. As these personal challenges were overcome, participants found that they were increasingly able to focus on what they saw as their purpose in life, offering greater love and service to others.

Of the 115 challenges described by the experiencers at the retreat, 113 fell into one of six challenge areas. The areas are suggestive of a progression of stages that may or may not be experienced by all, and not necessarily in this order. If future study validates these stages, it may aid experiencers and those involved with their lives in preparing for and processing each stage. The stages may help to outline a type of “step program” for the integration of the NDE.

Challenges Facing Near-Death Experiencers

First Challenge: Processing a Radical Shift in Reality

Participants described the NDE as an unanticipated, dramatic, and complete immersion into a reality unlike anything experienced in their lives previously. Participants underwent what some described as a permanent and complete paradigm shift in reality and view of themselves, a sudden correction in their accustomed path and perspective on life.

Seventeen survey respondents (74 percent) described their experience as “more real than reality,” with the remaining describing the experience as “equally real.” In this “equally real” or “more real” dimension, several respondents underwent dramatic life reviews in which they were shown how their past behavior and values affected themselves and others. All but one respondent, who had had a childhood NDE, stated emphatically that they were changed and remained profoundly impacted by their NDEs.

Participants returned with a radically new concept of life, death, the afterlife, body, mind, and spirit. They reported that after this sudden shift in reality with a new view of self and life’s purpose much time was needed to process the experience and all of its implications.
Seventeen respondents who specified the time required averaged 12.7 years to adjust to the NDE. The longest reported adjustment time was 42 years, and five respondents stated that they were still adjusting. Many retreat experiencers expressed that they were still reeling from the impact of their experience decades afterwards. All but three respondents said that there was not a day that went by when they did not think of their NDE.

The time needed to process the NDE was accompanied by an intense yearning to understand the experience. One retreat participant described her search for understanding as “voracious.” Respondents said they found relief through books or other sources when they discovered that their experience had a name and that they were not alone in having had an NDE.

Second Challenge: Accepting the Return

For 18 respondents (78 percent), the NDE was as “heavenly” as it was “more real than reality.” Every one of the respondents said they had experienced pure, unconditional love in their NDEs. All but three felt they had experienced their true “home,” their ultimate destiny. The remaining three described this as a “stopping point in our evolution,” “the ultimate reality,” and a place where “consciousness becomes pure.” Other terms commonly used included “the home of all homes,” “home base,” “my origin,” and “the Other Side.” All but one stated that this experience was one of the “afterlife” and that everyone will experience “something like this” when they die. Several elaborated on this statement by saying that they caught only a glimpse, and that people will receive their own custom-designed experiences when they die. Additional descriptive comments included a place “where we will ultimately merge back into the Source,” a “transition place until we move to another world,” and “the next step in evolution.”

When asked if they were afraid of death, all but two responded with an emphatic negative response. This “heavenly” place called “home” was perhaps the main reason that these participants said that not only did they no longer fear death, but they would rejoice when their time comes. In response to the question of how they would feel when they knew their time had come to die, responses ranged from “ecstatic” to “relief” to “acceptance.” None said they would fear or deny death.
Far from fearing death, 18 respondents (78 percent) had felt a yearning to return or felt “homesick.” Among those 18, frequency of feeling homesick ranged from “all the time” to “bouts now and then.” Four respondents (17 percent) felt a yearning for “home” that was so strong that they had considered suicide in order to return. One of those reported having attempted suicide, resulting in her second NDE, an unpleasant one. Another reported always harboring suicidal thoughts but being restrained from acting on them by fear and guilt. A third reported refraining from suicide because of a religious view of suicide as a mortal sin.

Eight respondents (35 percent) chose to return to life in at least one of their NDEs; whereas 14 (61 percent) were not given a choice, but were told they had to return or suddenly found themselves back in their bodies. Emotions about returning ranged from confusion, anger, fear, depression, disappointment, unhappiness, and rejection to acceptance, gratitude, relief, humility, and giddiness at the thought of being able to serve others. One respondent reported being not happy at all, but rather being on a 37-year quest to re-experience the blissful feelings of the NDE. Another described feeling “run over by God.”

In addition to these powerful emotions, respondents still dealt with the physical pain, illness, and/or emotional traumas that led up to the NDE in the first place, which could acerbate any feelings of homesickness, sadness, or anger at being sent back. Fifteen respondents (65 percent) reported still dealing with health issues related to the circumstances that lead to their NDEs.

**Third Challenge: Sharing the Experience**

Participants’ need to share their NDEs was intense. In the beginning, it was important not just to be believed and accepted, but also to share the experience in order to process and understand what happened. Accompanying that was a yearning to share their amazing journey, its joy, its love, its meaning, and its messages, especially with their loved ones. The challenge of sharing the experience was described by participants as fourfold.

*Expressing the Ineffable.* First, finding the words to express something for which there was no common comparison was a frustrating exercise. How could one describe the infinite, loving light that was
so unforgettable? How could one describe a dimension that was more real than reality? How could one explain the experience of timeless-ness, all-knowing, and oneness with all that is, was, and ever will be? How could one describe colors and sounds that do not exist on Earth? Words fell pitifully short of the true experience. The inability to express these profound ideas left many respondents feeling that other people could never truly comprehend or believe them.

Choosing Confidants. The second related challenge was deciding if they should share the experience at all, and with whom. Who would understand? Only one of the 23 respondents (4 percent) sought a clinical therapist specifically to discuss the NDE. Three others had been in therapy for other reasons and had mentioned their NDEs. Four respondents said that their NDEs were “pathologized” by doctors or therapists. Afraid of sharing, one respondent kept the NDE, which had occurred at age 14, entirely suppressed for 36 years, while another kept silent about the experience for 42 years. Neither had shared the NDE even with family members. Others also described decades of silence. This challenge of sharing was perhaps the most acute for those who had attempted suicide or for those who had terrifying or distressing experiences. In a world where people have dismissed the NDE as a “dream,” and where researchers or medical professionals have proclaimed the NDE a hallucination, an illusion of a dying, asphyxiated, medicated brain, respondents’ fears were well justified.

Coping with Negative Reactions. The third related challenge was coping with the traumatic and isolating effects of having told this most precious experience to doctors, family members, or trusted friends who were dismissive, misunderstanding, patronizing or otherwise negative. Eighteen respondents (78 percent) described a very painful and/or lasting consequence of having shared the experience with someone who did not want to hear about, believe, appreciate, or understand what happened. Two more had not suffered these consequences because they were either silent or extremely selective about whom they told. The fear, isolation, and loneliness felt by those who dared not share or had shared with someone who reacted negatively was one of the biggest challenges that participants described at the retreat. Typical comments included “My family didn’t want me to talk about it,” “My spouse discounted me,” “My husband started making fun of me in front of his friends,” and “My son was embarrassed when I
talked about my NDE." Eighteen respondents (78 percent) reported feelings of alienation, isolation, or depression over the problems associated with no being able to share the experience.

Focus of Others’ Interest. The fourth related challenge in sharing the NDE that retreat participants expressed was that when people did listen, they seemed interested in the experience itself, the details surrounding the manner of death, and the unusual aftereffects, while the very real personal, emotional, and spiritual needs of the experiencer were of lesser interest. It was perhaps for this reason that many participants felt that the only ones who could truly understand their personal challenges were other experiencers. Five respondents (22 percent) reported feeling most comfortable sharing with other experiencers, and five others (22 percent) felt most comfortable sharing at IANDS meetings or at the experiencer retreat. The remaining respondents said they were now comfortable sharing with anyone who expressed an interest and was openminded.

Fourth Challenge: Integrating New Spiritual Values with Earthly Expectations

The values, message, and meaning of the experience were often completely inconsistent with the participant’s life prior to the experience, but the participant was compelled to align that inconsistent life with the new paradigm. As noted above, 100 percent of respondents reported feeling changed by the NDE. Typical comments included “I had to make do with a new life,” “I was in tremendous pain over the reality of restructuring my life,” “I had to put the pieces of my life back together in a new way,” “It was a challenge of having inner knowledge and not knowing what to do with it,” and “What do I do now?”

The universal message of the near-death experience for most retreat participants centered on the importance of unconditional love and how we treat each other on Earth. Fifteen respondents (65 percent) were given implicit instructions, guidance, warnings, lessons, prophecies, knowledge, or messages. Examples of these messages were “We need to spread light and love,” “We can all be connected,” “We are meant to live in peace and harmony,” “We came here to learn about love,” “We are immortal, “Love unconditionally,” “We are here to learn and love,” “Simply love,” “At the core we are made of love,” “We are here as emissaries of a higher spirit,” “This life isn't all there is,” “The only
thing that is real is love energy," and "Love is everything and everything is love." Respondents reported feeling challenged, urged, or compelled to live up to these messages upon their return. All but one respondent, who was a childhood experiencer, said they had changed how they behaved towards others, becoming "more compassionate," "more forgiving," "more tolerant," "more loving," or "more empathetic."

These new outlooks, directions, and changes created friction in almost all important areas of participants' lives. The NDE affected relationships with others, careers, money, religion, and spirituality. Divorce and career changes brought on stressful emotional and financial upheaval, in addition to the other challenges participants faced. An example of an area of friction was the amount of time that participants reported volunteering, which was an average of 20 hours a week. Six respondents (26 percent) considered themselves fulltime volunteers. Of those who volunteered, 73 percent said they had experienced tension from family members for the amount of time and/or money spent on charitable causes.

Thirteen of the 17 respondents who had divorced said their divorce was due at least in part to incompatibility over the values learned in their NDE. Typical comments included "I wouldn't react the same; money no longer mattered," "My unconditional love for others was misinterpreted," "I had knowledge that I couldn't relate to her," "My attitudes and values all changed," "It made me irritable to try to hold up my old person," "I couldn't communicate my deepest feelings and be understood," "My husband couldn't handle my new psychic abilities," and "I was told in my NDE that I would die of a heart attack if I did not get a divorce."

Fifteen respondents (65 percent) reported career changes. Eleven of these said the career change was due at least in part to their NDEs. Conflicting values and attitudes included "A position of power no longer meant anything to me," "I saw how my job was irrelevant," "I couldn't handle how they treated people," "They took earthbound things too seriously," "They saw me as weak," "I could no longer tolerate the avarice and greed," "I had a heightened intuition about what was happening and didn't dare speak the truth," and "It wasn't acceptable to talk about my NDE at work."

Many participants no longer held conventional views of heaven, hell, God, evil, or sin. Eighteen respondents (78 percent) said they had changed their attitude about their religious upbringing following their NDEs. The remaining five either had no religious upbringing or were
childhood experiencers. Participants' new and often passionate views of spirituality and/or religion could evoke tension and even hostility among family members and religious followers. Some retreat participants described becoming "allergic" to traditional religious expectations, while others now found places of worship to be more comforting and affirming than ever before. In either case, a radical change in spiritual and religious views often alienated the participant from family, friends, and their traditional religious community. Typical comments included "I am no longer religious; I am spiritual," "There is some truth in all religions," "I don't like the dogma of traditional religions," "Religions create barriers," "I was totally deceived by my religious upbringing," "I look for spirituality in all religions," "The NDE became my basis of comparison," "I was an atheist; Man, was I wrong," "I love all religions," "My religion caused me anxiety; my NDE gave me peace," "Some fundamentalists think I was under the influence of Satan," and "I see God in everything."

With a change in conventional religious views, all but three respondents became involved in spiritual or NDE-related causes. Sixteen (70 percent) became actively involved in physical, emotional, and/or spiritual healing work, with nine of these working full-time as physicians, ministers, therapists, self-help writers, counselors, or related professionals. Five were involved in some capacity in building or working in mind/body/spirit centers. Many were involved with IANDS as local support group leaders or directors.

Views towards social issues of violence, prejudice, disease, poverty, or justice often became very pronounced after the NDE. Changes in political or social views could bring additional tensions to relationships with spouses, family members, and friends who once shared similar views. As a result of all these conflicts and changes, participants often retreated into isolation and depression. Participants sometimes felt as if they no longer fit in, like strangers in an alien world where few people understood or believed them.

Fifth Challenge: Adjusting to Heightened Sensitivities and Supernatural Gifts

Among the changes they underwent following their NDEs, retreat participants described the challenge of adjusting to heightened sensitivities and supernatural or psychic gifts, not all of which were welcomed. Eighteen respondents (78 percent) said that these height-
Heightened Awareness and Sensitivities. Every one of the respondents reported a heightened awareness and sensitivity toward strong emotions and negative behaviors. Two respondents (9 percent) reported specifically that they were now empathic. One reported experiencing “physical pain” caused by others’ negative emotions or behaviors. Typical comments included “I had to be alone with my sensitivities a lot; this caused a problem with my relationships,” “It’s hard for other people to understand why I am so sensitive,” “Lying behavior is most troublesome,” “I feel other people’s pain,” “I would pick up on people’s anxiety and get stomach problems,” and “I walk out of places that feel evil.”

Nineteen respondents (83 percent) reported being more acutely aware of smells, visions, tastes, sounds, and/or touch. Although these questions were not specifically asked in the survey, two respondents reported hearing different frequencies and two mentioned a higher sensitivity to chemicals. Nineteen (83 percent) reported a heightened awareness or sensitivity to electricity, energetic fields, chi, and/or auras.

Due to these supersensitivities, respondents described difficulty readjusting to previously “normal” environments, job settings, situations, and events. The sensitivity toward electricity or energetic fields could be so intense that respondents said they could not work with computers, wear watches, or be around electrical devices. Twenty respondents (87 percent) said they believed that such devices malfunctioned in their presence, and several mentioned feeling uncomfortable around any event, device, or person that generated “negative energy.”

Supernatural Gifts. In addition to these heightened sensitivities following an NDE, 19 respondents (83 percent) said that they had developed one or more supernatural gifts as a result of their NDEs. The gifts mentioned included intuitive, auditory, or visual knowledge of what was or what was to come (17 respondents, or 74 percent); ability to heal through energy work or laying on of hands (5 respondents, or 22 percent); mediumship (3 respondents, or 13 percent); telepathy (3 respondents, or 3 percent); seeing auras (2 respondents, or 8 percent), ability to communicate with animals (1
respondent, or 4 percent); and automatic writing (1 respondent, or 4 percent).

While many people may embrace or seek these gifts, that was not necessarily the case with retreat participants. These gifts could surprise and disrupt the experiencer’s customary thought processes and actions. Some learned to adjust their lives and careers to accept the gifts, while others described praying to be “left alone.” One respondent said, “It drove me crazy because I didn’t know what to do with it, so I closed it down.” Another said, “Initially, it was frightening.” Still another commented, “I worked hard to get rid of these sensitivities and psychic gifts; it felt like I was being punched.”

Sixth Challenge: Finding and Living One’s Purpose

Participants often struggled not just with the fact that they were sent back, but also with the reason for it. Every one of the respondents said they believed there was a reason they had been returned to this life and this reality. Twelve respondents (52 percent) were told specifically they had a purpose, but only four of those were told what it was, leaving 19 respondents (85 percent) to find it out on their own. One respondent stated that it took 20 years to identify it. Even though 20 respondents (91 percent) said they now relied on some form of guidance or intuition to make their decisions, 6 (26 percent) said they were still struggling to find their purpose in life. Most respondents seemed to be in agreement that, in general, we are here to serve and show unconditional love—a pretty tall order, but short on specifics and difficulty to apply.

All but one respondent (96 percent) said they believed that everything happens for a reason, although 9 (39 percent) said they did not know what those reasons were or that they did not need to know. The respondents who believed they understood why there is suffering on Earth offered comments like “We chose our lessons,” “It’s all homework,” “It’s not the experience but how we respond to it,” “We manifest our own disasters,” “To keep us on the path,” and “In order to appreciate life more, we must experience loss.” These beliefs often ran counter to traditional religious views, but seemed consistent among respondents.

The majority of respondents (61 percent) said they felt an urgent need to live according to the message or values learned in the NDE.
Four respondents (17 percent) said they were afraid of not living accordingly or fulfilling their mission.

Summary

All of the respondents agreed that these six challenges generally summed up the major issues faced by near-death experiencers, although some of these challenges overlapped. When asked which of these six was the most challenging for them, 8 respondents (35 percent) chose integrating new spiritual values with Earthly expectations, 7 (30 percent) chose sharing the experience, 4 (17 percent) each chose adjusting to heightened sensitivities and supernatural gifts and finding and living one's purpose, and 2 (9 percent) each chose processing a radical shift in reality and accepting the return.

Suggested Remedies

Retreat participants expressed repeatedly the importance of IANDS in helping them with their challenges. The following is a consolidated brainstormed list of the remedies provided by retreat participants, resources that did help or that would have helped. We present this list in the hope that it will stimulate ideas for the creation of new resources and will validate and confirm existing sources.

Resources that participants said did help or would have helped included (a) informed, inviting, and understanding medical professionals; (b) a source for information on research, comparisons with mystical traditions, historical perspectives, personal experiences, and aftereffects, such as books, websites, or other media; (c) time to process, meditate, be in nature, or pray; (d) informed and understanding spouses, family, and friends; (e) guides, mentors, integration partners, spiritual counselors, trained clergy, spiritual psychologists, and informed marriage and family counselors, ideally but not necessarily NDErs themselves; (f) workshops, retreats, support groups, step programs, conferences, online support groups, classes, and groups with experiencers; (g) self-help materials; (h) greater public awareness about NDEs; (i) venues to learn, speak, write, network, connect, and integrate the NDE into careers or
volunteer work on matters related to the NDE; and (j) a retreat for childhood NDErs.

**Discussion**

More than two decades ago, IANDS sponsored a five-day conference on Clinical Approaches to the Near-Death Experience, in which 32 physicians, nurses, counselors, clergy, and other clinicians, one-third of whom were also NDErs, shared therapeutic strategies and techniques that they had found effective in helping experiencers (Greyson and Harris, 1987). Since then, others have written extensively about the difficulties experiencers often face integrating the NDE and its aftereffects into their lives (Atwater, 1988; Ring, 1980), and about the rationale for various approaches that respect both the experience and the experiencer (Miller, 1987), including the particular challenges associated with frightening NDEs (Bush, 2002). The retreat described in this report was the first organized gathering solely of experiencers that included an explicit intent to explore the challenges they face.

In conducting this informal study, certain questions arose that should be addressed in future surveys or formal needs assessments. It became apparent in this study that the needs of childhood, teenage, and adult near-death experiencers were not the same. Furthermore, since several respondents had had multiple NDEs, it was difficult to determine to what degree the challenges may have matched the content of the experiences. Perhaps the challenges of those who had multiple NDEs differ from those who had only one. An additional limitation of this study was that many of the NDEs occurred decades prior to the retreat. It is possible that over the course of years some challenges had been forgotten or underemphasized. Alternatively, experiencers with more recent NDEs may not yet have experienced all the challenges due to the lengthy time required to integrate the experience.

Additional areas that should be explored in future research include particular effects of having one's NDE pathologized by health or counseling professionals, lasting effects of remaining silent about the NDE, whether “ego-inflation” may result from an NDE, best resources for alleviating each of these challenges, and kinds of new resources needed to help alleviate these challenges.

We hope that this study will result in more research and the development of tools to aid the experiencer. Through study of the
challenges such as outlined here, as well as the positive transformations that take place in an NDEr, we can validate the NDE and elucidate its dramatic power to affect people's lives.

References


Letters to the Editor

An Objective Correlate of Consciousness

To the Editor:

The work of many parapsychologists over the years suggests that it is likely that consciousness, when it has left the body, carries an energy envelope. This would account for the energy orbs that have been photographed in the past at purportedly haunted sites (Swanson, 2003). This envelope would consist of electromagnetic energy that could be detected by light sensors and strain gauges, for instance. This energy envelope would be an objective correlate of consciousness more useful to near-death researchers than the neural correlate of consciousness proposed by reductionist consciousness researchers (Chalmers, 1998) as it would allow an observer to "follow" consciousness during the initial "local" phase of exteriorization. It is important to realize that a correlate is just that: a concomitant phenomenon that is significantly statistically associated with that with which it correlates, and not necessarily identical with it or causally related to it. This fact sometimes seems to have been forgotten by proponents of biologically-based consciousness.

I propose equipping a room in which near-death experiences (NDEs) and/or out-of-body experiences (OBEs) might occur with light sensors and strain gauges, as was done with a target room by the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR) (Osis and McCormick, 1980). If this procedure worked, it would allow an observer to witness an NDE or OBE during its occurrence under the right circumstances. Perhaps the procession of the individual’s consciousness about the room could be displayed on a video monitor driven by a computer that processes the sensor readings.

This would go a long way toward making consciousness accessible to science, in that it would provide an objective referent to what is inherently subjective. This would also possibly provide for the development of a "consciousness meter" as proposed by philosopher David Chalmers (Chalmers, 1998).
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### Journal of Near-Death Studies

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