

# ANABIOSIS

## *The Journal for Near-Death Studies*

- From Alpha to Omega:  
Ancient Mysteries and the  
Near-Death Experience.....*Kenneth Ring*
- Evaluating Near-Death Testimony:  
A Challenge for Theology.....*Carol G. Zaleski*
- The Darkness of God: An Account of Lasting  
Mystical Consciousness Resulting from  
an NDE.....*John Wren-Lewis*
- Moody's Versus Siegel's Interpretation of the Near-Death  
Experience: An Evaluation Based on  
Recent Research.....*John C. Gibbs*
- Five Year Index

Published semi-annually by

THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR NEAR-DEATH STUDIES



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### The Journal for Near-Death Studies

*Anabiosis — "A restoring to life from a death-like condition; resuscitation."*

*Anabiosis—The Journal for Near-Death Studies* is a semi-annual periodical whose principal purpose is to publish articles concerned with near-death experiences and allied phenomena. Although the Journal will consider for publication any worthwhile manuscript from professionals or lay persons, it particularly welcomes submissions from scholars, scientists, researchers, and practitioners whose work is concerned with the study of human consciousness as it is affected by the prospect or occurrence of death. The Journal *will* publish articles dealing directly with near-death experiences as well as with such related phenomena as (1) out-of-body experiences; (2) death-bed visions; (3) experiences of dying persons, or those in contact with them, prior to the onset of death; and (4) experiences of persons following the death of another. The Journal *may* publish articles on other topics or experiences if such articles make a definite contribution to the understanding of the experience and meaning of death (for example, experiences suggestive of reincarnation).

Concerning the *types* of articles the Journal will publish, it specifically encourages submissions in the following categories: (1) research reports; (2) theoretical or conceptual statements; (3) papers expressing a particular scientific, philosophic, religious or historical *perspective* on the study of near-death experiences; (4) cross-cultural studies; (5) individual case histories with instructive, unusual features; and (6) personal accounts of near-death experiences or related phenomena.

Finally, the Journal invites contributions from professional and lay persons, whatever their background or orientation, but particularly from persons in the fields of medicine, nursing, psychology, parapsychology, sociology, philosophy, and religion. The Journal is especially interested in soliciting manuscripts (in English) from persons living outside the United States of America. The Journal as such has no commitment to any particular position or interpretation of near-death experiences (and related phenomena) and specifically encourages an exchange of a variety of perspectives on these issues.

Manuscripts should be submitted in duplicate, typed and double-spaced on 8½ x 11 paper to: Bruce Greyson, M.D., Department of Psychiatry, University of Connecticut Health Center, Farmington, CT 06032.

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## *The Journal for Near-Death Studies*

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## Editor's Foreword

We dedicate this issue of *Anabiosis* in loving memory to Charles P. Flynn, humanitarian, sociologist, and friend. Professor of sociology at Miami University, where he created the Love Project for his students, Chuck served actively on the Board of Directors of IANDS and the Editorial Board of *Anabiosis*, and was author of *After the Beyond: Human Transformation and the Near-Death Experience*, and co-editor of *The Near-Death Experience: Problems, Prospects, Perspectives*. His valued contributions to *Anabiosis*, to IANDS, and to near-death studies, are sorely missed. In dedicating this issue to Chuck, we hope to honor not only a much-loved colleague, but in addition his enthusiasm and his vision for a more loving world.

This issue of *Anabiosis* examines the near-death experience in the light of overarching philosophical or religious traditions. Kenneth Ring's "From Alpha to Omega" explores the parallels between NDEs and initiatory rites of Osirian and other ancient Wisdom Schools; Carol Zaleski's "Interpreting the NDE" compares contemporary NDEs with medieval Christian return-from-death accounts; John Wren-Lewis's "The Darkness of God" presents a first-person account of an NDE by an academic theologian previously knowledgeable about religious mystical traditions; and John Gibbs's "Moody's Versus Siegel's Interpretation of the NDE" contrasts the compatibility of recent empirical findings with the mind-body separation model and with the dissociative hallucination model. This issue concludes with a comprehensive index of the contents of Volumes 1-5 of the journal.

We are pleased to announce that, starting with Volume 6, to be published in 1987, the journal will be published quarterly rather than semi-annually by Human Sciences Press, under the new title *The Journal of Near-Death Studies*. Our editorial policies and role as IANDS' official journal will not change, but the affiliation with Human Sciences Press and the new quarterly format will permit wider and more frequent publication of near-death studies.

Bruce Greyson



## **From Alpha to Omega: Ancient Mysteries and the Near-Death Experience**

Kenneth Ring  
Department of Psychology  
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### **ABSTRACT**

The Osirian temple rites of ancient Egypt may have involved ceremonial procedures deliberately calculated to induce an experience that was functionally identical to modern near-death experiences (NDEs). In that way, initiates into those Mysteries were enabled to discern for themselves the fundamental teaching of many of the Wisdom Schools of antiquity that there is no death—which also represents the almost universal conviction of today's NDErs. In addition to exploring apparent parallels between these Osirian initiations and NDEs, certain important and possibly critical differences are also discussed.

It was philosopher Michael Grosso who one evening several years ago in conversation impressed upon me the importance of the connection between the mystery rites of antiquity and the near-death experience (NDE). Grosso, who has since written about this point (1983), emphasized for example that in the most famous of the Greek mysteries, those at Eleusis, the initiates into what are known as the Greater Mysteries (Kerenyi, 1977; Taylor, 1980) may well have undergone a psychedelically assisted death-and-rebirth experience akin to an NDE. Later, Grosso (1983) was even more certain of this hypothesis. In reviewing some of the classical literature pertaining to these rites, he concluded: "The ancient Greeks seem, in fact, to have worked out a fairly effective method for inducing a type of functionally equivalent near-death experience" (pp. 24-25.)

Although my own work in near-death studies at the time of our initial conversation on this subject was entirely within a modern psychological context, my interest in the NDE since then has gravitated increasingly toward the kind of perspective Grosso, as a classical scholar, could articulate so well. In his ruminations about the NDE, he was already concerned with its larger historical and even mythic significance as well as its relevance for other fields of empirical inquiry, such as parapsychology. For my part, as a

psychologist, I was then preoccupied with the basic parameters of the NDE as a type of transcendental experience and was only becoming aware of its profound after effects. Eventually, however, I found myself drawn to speculate about the possible role of the NDE in planetary transformation and human evolution (Ring, 1984a) and, most recently, have been led back to the Ancient Wisdom tradition itself in order to illuminate further the meaning of the NDE (Ring, 1984b).

Only now, I think, can I begin to appreciate more fully the ideas Grosso first outlined to me. They kindled a flame of sorts within me that evening that has been at least bright enough to allow me to grope my way through the literature on the ancient teachings<sup>1</sup> until I reached the source of the Eleusinian mysteries themselves—in the perennially absorbing Osirian temple rites of pharaonic Egypt.

### THE EGYPTIAN MYSTERIES

The origins of the mystery traditions in Egypt, like those of its colossal pyramids, are likely to remain forever obscure to us, but there is one highly relevant *fact* about what these initiations involved that in the view of many deep students of these rites (e.g., Adams, 1982; Brunton, 1984; Haich, 1974; Hall, 1975; Schwaller de Lubicz, 1978; Schure, 1971) seems incontestable: the candidate who successfully completed the trials comprising the supreme initiation came to know *experientially* that there is no death and that therefore his true self is immortal. Manly P. Hall (1982), for example, in a recent commentary, advanced this position as follows:

I think it is very important to bear in mind that the initiate system (in Egypt) was based upon one tremendous point . . . —that the individual should learn . . . through *personal* experience that death is an illusion . . . The ancients . . . developed a science by means of which they could communicate the fact and example and circumstance of death directly to another person. In other words . . . the initiates of the Mysteries were persons who had lived, died and been born again in this world . . .

This was the burden of the Mysteri(es)—that the individual who *knew*, not because he could believe or have faith, but, because of the rites, ceremonies and esoteric practices of the temple, he lived through it and came through alive and came out of darkness into light (knowing) as a certainty beyond question that there was no death. (Hall, 1982)

Of course, nobody knows with certainty exactly how this “science” of death induction and resurrection of which Hall speaks was actually carried out by the hierophants of the Egyptian temples. And if we focus on that grandest symbol of the Mysteries—the Great Pyramid at Giza—which some scholars think was the site of the

highest Osirian initiations, our uncertainty only increases. When the Caliph Al Mamoun, in search of fabulous treasure that many believed lay within the pyramid, penetrated into its interior in 820 A.D. and discovered its now famous passageways, he not only failed to find riches, he found, in effect, *nothing*. No art work adorned the corridors or the chambers; no hieroglyphics provided a basis for inferring what the inner structures of the pyramid were used for; no mummy was found to substantiate the view that this mighty temple was intended to be the enormous tomb of the pharaoh, Cheops. In the largest of the rooms then discovered, now called the King's Chamber, there was, it is true, one item of interest: an open stone coffin whose only occupant was the dust of the ages. Like its brother, the Sphinx, the Great Pyramid at Giza did not readily vouchsafe its secrets, especially to its defilers.

But, to be sure, we do have material evidence from other temples from which to reconstruct what *might* have taken place at the Great Pyramid itself. Hall, for instance, wrote that he knew what rituals were conducted in the King's Chamber and what its coffin was used for:

In the King's Chamber was enacted the drama of the "second death." Here the candidate, after being crucified upon the cross of the solstices and the equinoxes, was buried in the great coffer. There is a profound mystery to the atmosphere and temperature of the King's Chamber: it is of a peculiar deathlike cold which cuts to the marrow of the bone<sup>2</sup>. The room was a doorway between the material world and the transcendental spheres of Nature. While his body lay in the coffer, the soul of the neophyte soared as a human-headed hawk through the celestial realms, there to discover first hand the eternity of Life, Light and Truth, as well as the illusion of Death, Darkness and Sin. Thus in one sense the Great Pyramid may be likened to a gate through which the ancient priests permitted a few to pass toward the attainment of individual completion. It is also to be noted incidentally that if the coffer in the King's Chamber be struck, the sound emitted has no known counterpart in any known musical scale. The tonal value may have formed part of that combination of circumstances which rendered the King's Chamber an ideal setting for the conferment of the highest degree of the Mysteries. (1975, p. 44)

There have, of course, been many attempts to reconstruct just what procedures were employed in the higher Osirian Mysteries and to imagine what their effects were on the candidate. Naturally, these accounts vary somewhat in their details and a great deal in their style (e.g., novelistic renderings by various writers steeped in the lore of Egyptian and other mysteries are a definite genre of their own in this field<sup>3</sup>), but on the *essentials* of these rites, and on their purposes, most commentators seem to be in general agreement. For



my purposes, the version provided by Paul Brunton (1984), though nearly half a century old, is most instructive, so I will rely chiefly upon it in what follows.

### THE OSIRIAN INITIATION RITE

Brunton's understanding of what he called "The mysterious drama of the innermost secret rite of Osiris" was based not only on his extensive travels in Egypt and his knowledge of the classical literature on this subject, but also on his own quite extraordinary experiences one night while alone in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid. According to his own account, at one point he found himself separated from his physical body and thereby absorbed some of the typical insights now commonly reported by today's near-death experiencers (Brunton, p. 75). Thus, Brunton's perspective on these sacred rites is rooted in direct personal knowledge as well as that gained by study and reflection upon cultural artifacts, discussion with other adepts, and his encyclopedic reading.

In any case, Brunton's formulation begins in complete accord with Hall's:

(This) august rite was nothing more or less than a process which combined hypnotic, magical and *spiritual* forces in an attempt to detach the candidate's soul from the heavy bondage of his fleshy body for a few hours, and sometimes for a few days, that he might ever after live with the memory of this epoch-making experience and conduct himself accordingly. The survival of the soul after death, accepted by most men through faith in their religion, he was thenceforth able to accept, strengthened in his conviction by the evidence of his personal knowledge. (1984, p. 84)

The whole purpose and purport of the initiation was to teach the candidate that "There is no death!" And he was taught this lesson in the clearest and most practical way possible, i.e., by being made to experience within himself the actual process of dying and mysteriously entering into another world of being. So deep was his trance that he was placed inside a painted and inscribed mummy-case whose lid was closed and sealed. To all intents and purposes, he had actually been murdered! (1984, p. 170)

In short, the initiate was made to identify with the Egyptian god of resurrection, Osiris, and experientially undergo Osiris's symbolic journey wherein after his death and the scattering of his body, he was reconstituted and brought back to life.

In the beginning of this journey, as with physical death itself, there could be terror. According to an ancient testimony, which Brunton claims is representative of this aspect of the experience, at the outset:

“(T)he mind is affected and agitated in death just as it is in initiation into the Great Mysteries; the first stage is nothing but errors and uncertainties, laborings, wanderings and darkness. And now, arrived on the verge of death and initiation, everything wears a dreadful aspect; it is all horrors, trembling and affrightenment.” (1984, p. 183)

But as the experience progresses and the death-trance takes hold, the imagery becomes paradisiacal and the feeling ecstatic. Thus, the above account continues:

“But this scene once over, a miraculous and divine light displays itself . . . perfect and initiated they are free, crowned, triumphant, they walk in regions of the blessed.” (1984, p. 183)

Perhaps the entire experience can be made more vivid if we resort for a moment to one of the novelistic reconstructions, mentioned earlier, of this secret rite. Consider, for example, this imaginative picturing by Schure (1971), which is consistent with Brunton’s summary to this point:

At dusk the priest of Osiris, bearing torches, accompanied the new adept into the lower crypt . . . In a corner was an open marble sarcophagus.

“No man,” said the hierophant, “escapes death, and every living soul is destined to resurrection. The adept goes through the tomb alive, that afterward he may enter into the light of Osiris. Lie down, therefore, in this coffin and wait for the light! . . .”

The initiate lay down in the open sarcophagus. The hierophant extended his hand over him in blessing and the procession of initiates left the cave in silence. A little lamp placed on the ground flickeringly lights the four sphinxes which support the thick columns of the crypt. A choir of deep voices is heard, low and muffled. Where does it come from? It is the funeral chant! He is breathing his last; the lamp casts a final light, then it extinguished entirely. The adept is alone in the darkness. The coldness of the tomb falls upon him, freezing all his limbs. Gradually he experiences the painful sensation of death and falls into a lethargy. His life passes before him in successive scenes like something unreal and his earthly consciousness becomes more and more vague and diffuse. But as he feels his body disintegrate, the ethereal part, the fluid in his being, is disengaged. He enters into an ecstasy . . .

What is that shining, far distant point which appears imperceptible against the black background of the shadows? It is coming closer, it is growing larger, it is becoming a five-pointed star, whose rays include all the colors of the rainbow, and which shoots into the darkness discharges of magnetic light. Now there is a sun which attracts it into the brightness of its incandescent center . . . Then the ecstatic one feels flooded with a warm, caressing breeze. Having assumed strange forms, the cloud condenses and becomes a human figure, the figure of a woman, the Isis of the hidden sanctuary, but younger, smiling and radiant. A transparent veil is wrapped around her and her body shines through it. In her hand she holds a scroll

of papyrus. She softly approaches, leans over the initiate lying in his tomb, and says, "I am your invisible sister; I am your divine soul, and this is the book of your life . . ." (Schure, 1971, pp. 60-61)

Returning to Brunton now, he indicated that, in effect, what Schure gave to his adept at the very end of the passage just quoted was a feature of the very highest form of initiation during which, as Brunton put it,

The souls of men were not merely freed temporarily from their bodies in a condition of simulated death . . . but . . . were actually carried up to the loftiest spheres of being, to the realm of the Creator Himself<sup>4</sup>. In this marvellous experience the finite mind of man was drawn into contact with the infinite mind of his superior divinity . . . This fleeting contact of incomparable ecstasy was enough to change his entire attitude towards life. He had partaken of the holiest food that exists in life. He had discovered the ineffable ray of Deity which was his true innermost self, and of which the soul-body which survives death was merely the intangible vesture. He was, in verity and fact, born again in the highest sense. . . .

The doctrine of the immortality of the soul was more than a mere doctrine now; it was a proven fact, which had been completely demonstrated to him. When he awakened to the light of day, the initiate could truly say of himself that he had returned to the world completely transformed and spiritually reborn. (1984, pp. 187, 188)

In these excerpts, Brunton established not only what the candidate learned in the culminating phase of his initiation, but also that this direct knowledge had a deep impact on his character and orientation toward life. In this connection, he went on to assert that:

The Mysteries changed a man's attitude toward death and consequently altered his conduct toward life. (1984, p. 191)

And he quoted Diadorus, a native of Sicily, to the effect that:

It is said that those who have participated in the Mysteries became more spiritual, more just and better in every way. (1984, p. 185)

In conclusion, if we accept Brunton's understanding of the nature and purpose of the Osirian initiation rite, we see that the candidate, in entering the transcendental realm through death's door, comes back to life imbued with a spiritually enlightened attitude that finds direct expression in his daily conduct and relations with others. Hence, initiation generates transformation.

## THE NDE IN LIGHT OF THE OSIRIAN MYSTERIES

Certainly no one familiar with the literature on the near-death



experience could fail to notice the many parallels, both in phenomenology and aftereffects, between the Egyptian initiation and the NDE. It's obvious that if, as Grosso has observed, the Greeks had contrived their own means of inducing a kind of NDE in the Eleusinian Mysteries, the earlier Egyptians, whose entire culture revolved around death and resurrection, had provided them—and the world—with the ritual basis for inducing such states. And now it is equally clear that the Egyptian legacy has not just historical but contemporary relevance as well: the NDE is, in its essence, *identical* to what the Osirian candidate learned during his initiation<sup>5</sup>.

Nevertheless, my interest here goes beyond that of just drawing parallels between ancient rites and modern experience. I think that if we are properly to understand the significance of NDEs and their potential contribution to our planet's future, we need in fact not so much to dwell on the similarities I have so far stressed, but to bring out some of the principal *differences* between the Mysteries of antiquity and the NDEs of today.

First, then, we must recall that in ancient times, the number of candidates who were initiated into the mysteries was really quite small and that the initiates themselves were highly selected. This contrasts with what, according to reliable estimates (e.g., Gallup, 1982), appear to be *millions* of NDErs, just in the United States alone (to say nothing of the vast number of NDErs elsewhere in the world), who can claim to know at least something of what the initiate of old experienced. Similarly, on the basis of demographic data (Gallup, 1982; Ring, 1984a), modern-day NDErs appear to be drawn from all strata of society without prejudice or obvious patterning. Thus, the elitism of Egyptian initiation has seemingly given way to the democratic spirit of our own era. The NDE is, as it were, an ecumenical experience.

Second, during the period of the Osirian Mysteries, the candidate had to undergo many prior trials and initiations and had to purify himself repeatedly before he was allowed to enter into the highest initiation where knowledge of immortality and one's essential divinity was disclosed experientially to him. In short, by the time of his supreme initiation, the candidate had been fully prepared for it. By contrast, the typical NDEr finds himself, willy-nilly, suddenly confronted by the onset of apparent imminent death, with no warning and certainly in most cases, little or no spiritual training of the kind that might provide some preparatory insight into the nature and implications of the NDE.

Third, we also must bear in mind that the initiate *sought* to be instructed, received his training and initiations over a long period

of time from the priests and hierophants of the temple, and remained throughout embedded in a culture and context that gave meaning and coherence to his quest. The usual circumstance of today's NDEr could hardly be more different. His or her experience comes not through conscious choice, but as a direct consequence of unwanted illness or accident; the hierophants are the resuscitation team, which administers the modern equivalent of the initiation ceremony, CPR; the setting is the contemporary sterile hospital where illness is central and subjective experience an annoying distraction to be minimized or disregarded.

Finally, as is well known, the Osirian Mysteries *remained* mysteries because they were conducted in secret and the candidates were bound by a solemn oath not to divulge what they had seen and experienced. The penalty for violation of this sacred promise was death, as it also was for the initiates into the Greater Mysteries at Eleusis. In today's world, the "secret" of the NDE has not only been routinely revealed, but *celebrated* in countless articles and many books as well as on radio, television, and the motion picture screen. In short, the NDE has become a staple of our cultural fare, and about as secret as the local convenience store. And the "penalty" for disclosure, for both experiencer and researcher alike, is apt to be an invitation to "tell all" on the next available television talk show. One can only imagine the response of the ancients to these latter-day developments.

Still, whether it was wise or otherwise, the "secret" *is* out, and the ancient mystery teachings, though in a corrupted form, have themselves been resurrected for the modern age. Millions of contemporary initiates have been inducted into today's version of the Osirian Mysteries and collectively they have brought a powerful and compelling message of hope that has now reached much of humanity. As a result, the idea of immortality has been empowered by a new, widespread and, apparently, credible *experiential* perspective—that of the NDE—and the symbol of light seems well on its way to replacing the spector of the Grim Reaper in our archetypal imagery of death itself.

Though we may have some feelings of disquiet over the way in which the Mysteries have returned in our time and some reservations about the uses to which they have been put, *that* they have reentered our cultural life in this vital way would not be surprising to at least a few of the students of these ancient rites. Hall (1975), for example, has written eloquently of his conviction that the teachings of antiquity would one day find a new glory and Brunton, more quietly, has expressed the same thought:

The first great message of the ancient Mysteries—"There is no death," although always susceptible of personal experiential proof by a mere few, is destined to be broadcast to the whole world . . . (I)t is the writer's hope that conditions may be found, circumstances may be propitious, and the right persons forthcoming to plant a *modern* version, entirely altered to suit our changed epoch, of those mysteries once more in each of five continents of our world. (1984, pp. 191, 193-194)

Perhaps we may now have some reason to think that Brunton's hopeful prophecy is beginning to be realized in our own era, as a result, *in part*, of the collective testimony of NDErs. This, surely, is a tempting speculation and as much as I personally would like to endorse it, I feel obliged to sound a note of restraint in view of the very *differences* between ancient initiates and modern NDErs that I have already pointed out.

In my opinion, we must be mindful that *most* NDErs, however numerous they are and however much publicity they have received, are essentially neophytes on the spiritual path. Like most of the rest of us, they are still struggling to find their way and to reflect the light more fully. To be sure, they have seen and incorporated the light and there appears to be little doubt that, despite their lack of preparation for the NDE and its often difficult aftermath, many NDErs have been profoundly transformed by their experience (e.g., Ring, 1984a; Flynn, in press; Grey, in press). Similarly, there is every reason to think that the NDE is itself a powerful catalyst for spiritual awakening and development. At the same time, however, we must remember that precisely *because* most NDErs have been thrust into their initiation without either purification or preparation, they may bring back a somewhat distorted version of its essential insights or, even if that is not the case, be unable truly to appreciate its significance or conduct themselves in accordance with its spiritual implications. In a phrase, it is probable that in most NDErs there will be a *mix* of the gold of the NDE and the copper of the ego. In this light, it may be useful to view the NDE as an initiation in the sense of a *beginning* rather than, as it presumably was for the Osirian initiates, the culmination of a process of spiritual development and refinement.

If my own sense of caution here has any merit, it may also have the virtue of redirecting our attention once more to the ancient mysteries themselves in order to learn from them how best to cultivate and nourish the spiritual potential that the NDE seems to symbolize for us at this point in humanity's development. The few ancients knew what the modern multitudes are coming to know; and the teachings of the former, translated into a meaningful contemporary



frame of reference, could well help us to avoid some of the pitfalls into which we might otherwise stumble in our attempt to honor the “inner teaching” of the NDE. A recent lesson in point that most readers will remember is the so-called “psychedelic revolution” of the ’60s. Twenty years ago, millions of persons had also “seen the light” through psychedelic drugs, and some apostles of LSD began to prophesy that we were witnessing the advent of a new spiritual epoch in humanity’s history that would transform and bring peace to the world. Psychedelics, as a class of drugs, were hardly new to the world scene at that time, of course; they had been used sacramentally in many cultures for hundreds, even thousands, of years. But when we used them recreationally, outside of a sacred ritual context, and became enchanted with “psychedelic gurus,” we fell into a trap that we were never able to extricate ourselves from, and, twenty years later, the cloud of nuclear horror is darker than ever. It would be a shame—and it might possibly prove to be a disaster—if we were to allow ourselves to be similarly beguiled by the allure of NDEs and fail to discern and learn from the larger historical *and* spiritual matrix from which they spring. Only in that way, I believe, can we help to fashion something of a planetary cultural context, which we will need if we are ever to realize on a global scale the promise concealed within the NDE.

## THE PROMISE OF THE NDE: FROM ALPHA TO OMEGA

What *is* the promise of the NDE?

In my last book, *Heading Toward Omega* (Ring, 1984a), I speculated that the NDE, because of its power of spiritual transformation, could have a significant role to play in accelerating human evolution toward a higher level of consciousness. Indeed, I argued that the millions of NDErs that modern technology has spawned, as well as millions of others who have had a similar spiritual transformative experience however it may have been brought about, might be regarded as the *prototype* of a more highly evolved type of human being now coming into manifestation for which I appropriated the term *Homo noeticus*. Others (e.g., Grosso, 1984; Grey, in press), while not necessarily agreeing with my own formulation of this evolutionary hypothesis, have also discerned in the NDE the seed of a higher humanity.

Though this hypothesis derives from today’s near-death research, it is now apparent to me that it was also inherent in the lessons of the ancient mystery teachings themselves. For example, Paul Brunton averred:

The experience of initiation was a miniature duplicate of the experience which was destined to become that of the whole human race, through the processes of evolution—the sole difference being that, as the former was a forced hurried growth, an artificial process like entrancement was employed, whereas with the latter both psychic and spiritual development would proceed naturally.

Thus the experience repictured within the soul the entire drama of human evolution, the ineluctable fate of human beings. (Brunton, 1984, pp. 187-188)

Hall (1951) also expressed a similar view when speaking of the mystic and the power of the mystical experience itself:

It would be most helpful if at this time psychologists and other specialists in the field of man's internal phenomena would consider the possibility that the mystic is the prototype of future humanity . . .

And again:

Is not mysticism the normal extension of growth pressing on toward the production of superior types of beings? . . . It is the mystic . . . who will be the superman of tomorrow. (1951, pp. 188, 189)

Hall posited a process of growth and spread for the mystic that is virtually identical to what I propose for the mystic *malgre lui*, the NDEr:

The operations of Nature nearly always manifest first by producing isolated examples of processes later to become general. These apparent anomalies gradually increase in number until they establish the new norm. In this way the exceptional is slowly transformed into the usual and acceptable. (1951, p. 192)

Thus, the Alpha of the ancient mysteries implies the same *ultimate* evolutionary destiny as does the Omega hypothesis of modern near-death studies. In this understanding, whether we are describing the initiation process in a temple crypt or in an operating room, we are talking about a divine human potential with the inherent power to spiritualize the individual *and* his world.

With the spread of the modern form of the mystery teachings—through the NDE—and as more individuals personally survive this initiation and thus contribute further to the dissemination of these teachings, another opportunity presents itself for the spiritual regeneration of humanity.

Nevertheless, we cannot expect that this outcome will occur automatically or that it will necessarily approach fulfillment in the short run. Our “ultimate evolutionary destiny” is one thing; whether

we or our children will even survive into the twenty-first century is another matter. To increase the chances of bringing the NDE seed to harvest any time soon, we will need to align ourselves fully and consciously with the spiritual forces of our own age as well as to learn from those masters of wisdom of earlier times whose teachings have endured.

Finally, as my friend Michael Grosso recently (1984) advised us, it comes down to what each of us is prepared to do to understand the mystery of ourselves. I end as I began, indebted to Michael Grosso, whose closing words in response to a previous article of mine suit my purposes as well as they did his:

One place the ancient archetype of the Western overself returns with all the force of the repressed is the hospital deathbed. Amid the scene of ritual resuscitation where, unfortunately, there are no hierophants, no guides, no one to help tease out the meaning of the experience from the afterglow of memory, there the mythology of death and enlightenment comes to life, powerful as old, flashing with transforming light, the heights and the abysses all intact. But probably for the great majority, and it would seem we are talking of millions now, one has to say with T. S. Eliot: "we had the experience but missed the meaning." Near-death researchers are helping to resuscitate the meaning and to decipher the Rosetta stone of the psyche's ancient mysteries.

Still there is no reason to cheer too loudly. Meaning is always born in an individual creative act, a deed as solitary as dying. In the present age each of us must create his own myth . . . (A)t least near-death researchers can go on sharing their findings, setting them out as raw material, as a resource for anyone interested in self-exploration, who wants to build his own myth of death. Every person's life is a mystery ritual, and it may be the mark of the new age to come that every person will have to be his or her own hierophant. (Grosso, 1984, pp. 160-161)

If indeed we are heading toward Omega, it will not be a free ride. We shall have to work to get there, beginning with the never-ending work on ourselves.

## NOTES

1. I wish to thank Mineda J. McCleave for her invaluable guidance in directing me to some key references here.
2. Hall is not just repeating hearsay; he himself entered the King's Chamber in connection with his personal explorations of the pyramids.
3. For representative and engrossing examples of this kind of reconstruction, see Haich, 1974; Schwaller de Lubicz, 1978; and Schure, 1971.
4. In the first part of this passage Brunton is alluding to the common



understanding that the spiritual aspirant underwent successive *degrees* of initiation that disclosed to him progressively “higher” truths. Thus, in the first initiation, the candidate learned the “truth” of personal survival; in the final initiation, he experienced contact with the Creative Force of the universe itself. These degrees of initiation appear to correspond to different levels of *depth* in contemporary near-death experiences.

5. In John White’s opinion, it would be more accurate to say that the near-death experience approximates the essence of the *first* initiation (see footnote 4, above). (White, personal communication, Feb. 27, 1985).

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## Evaluating Near-Death Testimony: A Challenge for Theology<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

In nearly every culture, people have told stories of visionary journey to other worlds, in which an individual dies, enters the afterlife, and—by divine decree or medical prodigy—comes back to life. The return-from-death story has a long history in Western culture, developing within the apocalyptic traditions of late antiquity, flourishing in the medieval Christian vision narratives that inspired Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and re-emerging today in reports of near-death experiences (NDEs). Evaluating the literature of NDEs is a task for historians of religion and theologians as well as psychologists. On the basis of a comparative study of medieval and contemporary accounts, this article proposes a nonreductionist interpretation, showing that it is possible to give credit to individual testimony while still taking into account the physiological, psychological, and cultural conditions that influence visionary experience in the face of death.

In nearly all cultures, people have told stories of travel to another world, in which a hero, shaman, prophet, king, or ordinary mortal passes through the gates of death and returns with a message for the living. In its most familiar form, this journey is a descent into the underworld. Countless figures of myth, sacred history, and literature are said to have ventured underground to the kingdom of death, to rescue its shadowy captives or to learn its secrets.

The voyage to the underworld—portrayed in religious epics and enacted in rituals, dramas and games—is often associated with initiatory death and rebirth. To represent states of ecstasy, divinization, and royal or prophetic consecration, on the other hand, many traditions favor the symbolism of ascent to higher worlds. Thus, legend attributes to the Prophet Muhammad a heavenly journey that sealed his status as God's messenger and established the model for later Islamic literature on the path of souls at death or in mystical rapture. So, too, the prophetic powers of Zarathustra and Mani, Enoch and St. Paul find expression in vivid tales of ascent to celestial spheres. In many different societies, moreover, ritual and spiritual practices aimed at achieving transcendence imaginatively act out or imitate

the heavenly journey. The shaman dons an eagle feather or mounts a sky pole to achieve what Mircea Eliade called a “breaking of the plane,” and to recover the primordial human condition of free access to heaven (Eliade, 1972). The Mithraic initiate, like Blake’s sunflower, counts the steps of the sun, ascending a seven-runged planetary ladder from darkness to light. The philosopher of antiquity disdains the mudball on which he stands and contemplates the superlunary and ideal world, launching a mental “flight of the alone to the Alone” (Plotinus, 1985).

A third variety of otherworld travel, neither so lofty as celestial ascent nor so profound as descent into the abyss, but perhaps just as lively in its appeal to the imagination, is the fantastic voyage. From the fabled wanderings of Odysseus and St. Brendan to the fanciful travelogues of Sir John Mandeville, to the chronicles of Marco Polo, Columbus, and Ponce de Leon, this genre has provided great scope for the interplay of the historical and the mythic imagination. The protagonist of a fantastic journey tale sets forth to find another world by exploring the remote reaches of this world: the far east or west, the edge of the ocean, the Ultima Thule. He returns to tell of hidden treasures and elusive Edens, of fabulous prodigies, monsters, ghosts, demons, and angels that inhabit the periphery of normal life.

From these three types of otherworld journey narration arise a multitude of overlapping forms and a vast array of mythical, mystical, dramatic, ritual, poetic, allegorical, and even satirical expressions. If there is such a thing as “otherworld journey studies,” it is thus a field whose materials are almost endlessly varied and whose contributors, approaching from their separate disciplines, rarely see eye to eye.

Scholars have investigated otherworld journey motifs in primitive and tribal religion, in Oriental, Mesopotamian, and Greek mythology, in works of Homer, Plato, and Vergil, in the multiple strands of Hellenistic religion, in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature, and in Zoroastrian, Islamic, and medieval Christian traditions. During the nineteenth century, there developed within Dante scholarship a whole industry devoted to mining the otherworld vision stories of Christian, Zoroastrian, and Islamic literature and folklore in the search for sources of the *Divine Comedy*. So many precursors were found and championed over the years that one might imagine that Dante needed little besides scissors and paste to construct his poetic journey (Labitte, 1842; Ozanam, 1845, 1859; d’Ancona, 1874/1912-13; Becker, 1899; Dods, 1903; Modi, 1914; Asin Palacios, 1919/1927, 1926, 1943; Cerulli, 1949; Munoz y Sendino,

1949; Silverstein, 1952).

The best scholarly treatments of otherworld journey literature focus on particular historical contexts, making use of comparative insights, but keeping a fairly tight rein on speculative interpretation. Too often, however, generalizations about the otherworld journey come from authors who view all its varied forms according to a single model, whether taken from shamanism, psychoanalysis, depth psychology, or psychedelia. More taxing, but much more worthwhile, would be to build an interpretive theory on the basis of detailed historical and cross-cultural study, just as, for example, Victor Turner has done for pilgrimage (Turner, 1973, 1977; Turner and Turner, 1978). Despite the profusion of scholarly and informal writings on the other world, this comprehensive work has yet be done.

For one who does not wish to tackle such an ambitious task, however, there remain smaller uncharted areas. Since no general theory of otherworld journey narration can be complete that fails to recognize its latest manifestations, we might search for contemporary parallels or vestiges. Perhaps the otherworld journey motif is "camouflaged" (as Eliade would put it) in the modern lore of space travel, which, like the fantastic voyage legends of the past, exemplifies the "lure of the edge."

Another possibility is that otherworld journey accounts might be found in contemporary culture, not only in camouflaged or self-consciously literary forms, but also in literal forms that claim to describe actual events. Indeed, this is true of at least one tenacious variety of otherworld journey narration, in which the protagonist "dies" and yet survives to tell the tale. Such eyewitness accounts of life after death can be found throughout the folklore and religious literature of the world. In Western culture, return-from-death stories developed within and alongside the apocalyptic traditions of late antiquity, flourished in the Middle Ages, declined during the Reformation, and reappeared in connection with some of the evangelical, separatist, and spiritualist movements of the nineteenth century. Today these tales have returned in full force in the form of "near-death" testimony, first popularized in the early 1970s by Raymond Moody's best-selling book *Life After Life* (1975), and kept in the public eye since then by a flood of books, articles, talk shows, and films on the subject.

Let us consider the opening statements of two accounts of visionary near-death experience:

My heart had stopped. . . . Everything was just completely black. . . . This void became the shape of a tunnel, and then before me was the most magnifi-

cent light; it's The Light in capital letters, and it's—very bluntly—the essence of God.

Four days ago, I died and was taken by two angels to the height of heaven. And it was just as though I rose above not only this squalid earth, but even the sun and moon, the clouds and stars. Then I went through a gate that was brighter than normal daylight, into a place where the entire floor shone like gold and silver. The light was indescribable, and I can't tell you how vast it was.

The first of these narratives came from Tom Sawyer, a heavy-equipment operator who lives in Rochester, New York. He was describing, to the audience of the television feature show called 20/20, what he experienced during fifteen minutes in which he lay crushed under the weight of his pickup truck (ABC-TV, January 6, 1983). The second passage has been attributed to Salvius, a sixth-century holy man who, according to *The History of the Franks*, spent a night lifeless on a funeral bier, but revived when God sent him back to serve the Church as a bishop (Gregory of Tours, 1957, Vol. 2, Book 7, pp. 88-94).

Are these two accounts describing essentially the same experience? Are the differences between them merely incidental? What do the similarities and differences between these narratives, fourteen centuries apart, tell us about the history of otherworld journey narration, its recurrent features, its social function, and its ultimate significance?

Such questions can be answered adequately only by examining accounts like those of Tom Sawyer and Salvius in historical context, so that they no longer appear either monolithically similar, or, because of different idioms, completely unrelated. A closer look will reveal, for instance, that Salvius's vision is a work of hagiography and, as such, differs from many return-from-death narratives of the same period that feature the visit of a sinner or penitent to hell. Tom Sawyer's account has not been reworked into a literary form, but he nonetheless tells a story that, as the present study will show, reflects modern assumptions and concerns.

I have elsewhere (Zaleski, in press) examined the return-from-death story in two widely separated settings: medieval Christendom and modern secular and pluralistic America. That comparative study highlighted features that are not otherwise obvious, putting into sharper relief the elements that are culturally specific, and at the same time drawing attention to perennial aspects of otherworld journey narration. It disclosed some of the ways in which the otherworld journey narrative is shaped by the social and historical situation in which it occurs. Although this does not tell us the whole

story about otherworld journeys, it does provide a new perspective on the question of how we might interpret the literature of other-world visions.

In examining contemporary near-death literature and its recent precursors as a parallel to the medieval Christian vision literature, I described comparable accounts of sudden exit from the body, travel across tunnels, paths, or fields, encounters with luminous guides and spirits, glimpses of heavenly bliss, reluctant reentry into life, and an aftermath of psychological and spiritual transformation. Yet there were striking differences as well: gone were the bad deaths, harsh judgment scenes, purgatorial torments, and infernal terrors of medieval visions; by comparison, the modern other world is a congenial place, a democracy, a school for continuing education, and a garden of unearthly delights.

If we are to succeed in negotiating the labyrinth of medieval and modern otherworld journey accounts, we must do more than simply tabulate these recurrent and contrasting motifs. We must search for a common thread that will not be deflected by variations in content, and that will help us to account for both similarities and differences without prejudice. That common thread is story: the otherworld journey is a work of the narrative imagination. As such, it is shaped not only by the universal laws of symbolic experience, but also by the local and transitory statutes of a given culture. The present study is intended to fix our attention on the narrative and imaginative character of otherworld visions, for only by holding onto this thread can we avoid the blind alleys down which so many discussions of religious visions and life after death have led.

How do we evaluate the visionary testimony of individuals who believe that they have returned from the gates of death? The current wave of interest in near-death experience makes this a live issue. We can no longer treat otherworld journey narration as a cultural fossil, buried safely in the past. With so many people turning to near-death literature in the hope of gaining insight into the meaning of death, theologians and scholars of religion have a responsibility to put this material in historical perspective and to reflect on its ultimate significance. To refuse the challenge to interpret near-death literature is only to widen the gap between academic theology and popular religious concerns. The result is a loss for both sides; not only does the public lose the benefit of historically informed discussion, but theology is deprived of a potentially revitalizing connection to contemporary experience.

It would be premature, at this stage, to announce a comprehensive theory of otherworld visions. Elsewhere (Zaleski, in press) I



have reviewed the interpretations that have already been advanced—from medieval Christian vision theory to the current debate over explanations of near-death experience—and have suggested some alternative views.

In the present paper, I offer some reflections on the symbolic character of otherworld visions and on the visionary and imaginative aspects of religious thought in general. If, as William James asserted in “The Sentiment of Rationality,” the role of philosophy is to define the universe in a way that gives people a warrant and a point of reference for the use of their innate capacities, then it must also make a place for our imaginative powers (James, 1979). The traditional way to accomplish this has been to define the universe as an object that religious images describe. Unfortunately, for those who think critically about science, history, and world religions, such simple acceptance of religious imagery no longer seems to be a reasonable option. We can still say that the religious imagination guides us through life and as far as the threshold of a wider life, but we cannot claim that it supplies us with direct maps of an afterlife. Without attempting to pronounce the final word on this complex subject, this paper indicates some directions for future exploration.

### EXPERIENTIAL CLAIMS

One conclusion to which the comparative study of contemporary and medieval Christian return-from-death accounts leads us is that the West has seen no steady progress from literal to literary use of the otherworld journey motif (Zaleski, in press). Although the line between fiction and confession is necessarily blurry, contemporary near-death reports—like their medieval predecessors—make the claim, at least, that they represent actual experience. In this paper, I will consider whether it is possible to take this claim seriously without being naive.

Some might feel inclined to disregard the question, as do the social and literary historians who concern themselves only with the cultural transmission of otherworld journey imagery. For if we take visionary accounts at face value, as a direct description of what happens after death, we run the risk of trapping ourselves in a shrunken utopia, isolated from the scientific and historical awareness that is our culture’s special gift. Theologians, as much as other intellectuals, might wish to ignore experiential claims in order to avoid having to evaluate testimony that conflicts with accepted religious and scientific principles, or that brings the mysteries of life, death, and the hereafter embarrassingly close. It is safer to treat the otherworld

journey solely as a metaphor or literary motif that illustrates a psychological or moral truth. By doing so, we render it harmless; we attenuate the visionary virus until it is so weak and thin that it produces immunity instead of contagion.

Aside from the injustice this does to the individuals who report near-death experience, however, it also is an inadequate way to account for the imaginative power of the otherworld journey. As I have shown (Zaleski, in press), the otherworld journey motif becomes impotent if it does not retain at least a hint of correspondence to a sensed, dreamed, or imagined reality. An image like the review of deeds still has some resonance for us because, along with its metaphorical uses, it continues to evoke an imaginative visualization of the other world. In contrast, an expression like “the road to hell is paved with good intentions,” which we recognize as exclusively metaphorical, has become a dead circuit, cut off from any conceivable reference to experience.

We must therefore take experiential claims seriously in order to understand the whole range of otherworld journey imagery, from its vestiges in our ordinary language to the more overt forms considered here. More important, the current controversy over the rights and needs of the dying—and the fact that many people are turning to books like *Life After Life* (Moody, 1975) for spiritual guidance or consolation—puts us under an obligation to assess near-death literature in an informed and sympathetic way.

It is a good sign, then, that some religious thinkers have taken an interest in interpreting near-death literature. Before I make suggestions of my own, it will be useful to consider the main currents of theological opinion on the subject.

When *Life After Life* appeared, it provoked widely varying reactions. In *Reflections on Life After Life*, Moody (1977) remarked that there were some among the clergy who accused him of selling “cheap grace,” while others thanked him for producing a book that was such an asset to their pastoral work with the dying and bereaved. That pattern of response continues as public awareness of near-death experience grows. The loudest reaction against *Life After Life* and its successors comes from conservative Christians who see these books as a Satanic diversion, designed to lull us into a false sense of security about the future life, to lure us into occult practices such as astral projection, to beguile us into accepting the advances of demons disguised as departed spirits, and to sell us a secular (but fundamentally diabolic) bill of goods about salvation without Christ. At the same time, there has been a proliferation of born-again versions of near-death experience—complete with recollections of

hell that, according to Maurice Rawlings, are repressed by the *Life After Lifers* (Rawlings, 1979, 1980).

On the other side, Moody reported that Christian clergy often tell him that *Life After Life* has strengthened their faith in the traditional Church teachings that it is their office to represent. It gave one minister the confidence to affirm at a funeral that the woman he eulogized had gone to join her deceased husband with Christ: "I wasn't speaking figuratively or symbolically; I meant it. This gave them comfort. . . ." (Moody, 1977, p. 54). Near-death testimonials play a similar role in the pages of *Guideposts*, *Soul Searcher*, *Spiritual Frontiers*, and other magazines of Christian or Christian/Spiritualist inspiration.

Among professional Christian theologians, the idea that near-death testimony might make a case for life after death has received critical attention, both favorable and dissenting. A few mavericks—notably John Hick and Paul Badham—suggest that clinical and parapsychological evidence might provide just the empirical elixir we need to invigorate our culture's withered eschatological imagination. Yet neither of those theologians relies on empirical arguments alone. In *Death and Eternal Life*, Hick (1976) combined the evidence from mediumship and parapsychology with scientific, philosophical, and moral grounds for conceiving the future life on an evolutionary model. Badham's view is that near-death experiences and other psychic phenomena, while providing no guarantee of immortality, at least push aside naturalistic prohibitions and make room for a faith founded on the experience of relationship to God (Badham, 1980; Badham and Badham, 1982).

In general, however, academic circles have not seen much debate over the implications of near-death research. The predominant trend has been to ignore or repudiate efforts to find evidence for existence after death. One reason is that many Christian thinkers believe that the whole idea of personal survival has been rendered obsolete by recent scientific, philosophical, and linguistic discoveries. Beyond that standard and widespread skepticism, however, several generations of liberal and neo-orthodox theologians have warned us against preoccupation with the hereafter. It is a narcissistic distraction from the ethical and social mission of the Church, they argue, and it is both childish and arrogant to expect more from rational or empirical proofs than from biblical promises. Applying that criticism to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a Lutheran pastor wrote, "If life after death could be empirically verified 'beyond a shadow of a doubt,' then there would seem to be little need for faith" (Herhold, 1976; see also Woelfel, 1976; Ousley, 1981).

For some religious critics, the most serious flaw in near-death literature is its portrait of death as a pleasant, gentle transition. Converging streams of Freudian, existentialist, and neo-orthodox thought, along with modern biblical scholarship, have produced a strong sentiment among theologians that it is essential to the Christian message to affirm the reality and sting of death (e.g., Tillich, 1959, p. 30). Ever since Oscar Cullman drew, or perhaps overdrew, the distinction between the resurrection faith of Christianity and the Greek philosophical idea of natural immortality, this contrast has been a recurrent theme, even a rallying cry, of theological writing (Cullman, 1965). Stephen Vicchio spoke for many when he complained that “the empty tomb for Kubler-Ross and Moody is superfluous if not redundant. There is no need for Easter if we are immortal” (Vicchio, 1979, p. 65; see also Herhold, 1976).

Those who pit Cullman against Kubler-Ross and her ilk are actually heirs to a long tradition of Christian polemic against the opponent—pagan or straw man—who would stake our hopes on knowledge rather than faith, on nature rather than sacred history, on the soul’s intrinsic purity rather than on God’s willingness to cleanse it. Viewed pragmatically, however, the real issue in these debates is whether the alternative views make a difference in religious life; do they breed complacency or catalyze conversion? But the answer to this question cannot be decided solely on biblical, doctrinal, or philosophical grounds. A great deal depends on social climate and personal temperament; as I shall suggest below, the history of religion tells us that similar eschatological conceptions may serve, under different circumstances, either to awaken efforts to merit an afterlife or to deaden those efforts by feeding people pie-in-the-sky consolations.

In the current atmosphere of skepticism and cultural fragmentation, fears and doubts about survival of death can be just as morally and spiritually paralyzing as a monolithic faith in its certainty. Those who testify to the transforming effect of near-death experience often say that their conviction that death is not the end gave them the freedom and energy to change their way of life. On the other hand, when the search for immortality is isolated from other religious concerns, as in psychical research, it can become something tawdry, egoistic, and this-worldly. So, too, medieval Christian vision literature runs the gamut from profound to mechanical understandings of penance, purgatory, and conversion. Perhaps the doctrine itself is not at fault, but only its use; the present danger, then, is not that people will become convinced of immortality, but that the whole subject will be trivialized by a narrow focus on the case for or against survival.

Clearly, a new approach is needed; to make near-death testimony an arena for re-staging old philosophical or theological battles will not suffice. Since it appears to be a hopeless task, in any case, to determine objectively whether near-death reports are accurate or inaccurate depictions of the future life, it might be more fruitful for theologians to consider near-death visions as works of the religious imagination, whose function is to communicate meaning through symbolic forms rather than to copy external facts. This is the aspect of near-death literature that the present study attempts to illuminate.

### DOUBLE VISION

The purpose of my comparison of medieval and modern vision narratives (Zaleski, in press) has been to benefit from the stereoscopic effect, the depth perception that the juxtaposition of two separate perspectives can provide. It will be helpful, then, to review the results of that comparison before proceeding to generalize about the religious implications of otherworld journey narration.

In broad terms, the similarities I found were as follows: both medieval and modern narratives depict the death and revival of individuals whose experience is held up as an example of what we can expect in our own final moments. The manner of death—departure of the spirit from the body—is described in frankly dualistic terms, the separated spirit looking down upon its former dwelling place with indifference or contempt.

After leaving the body, the visionary finds himself in a liminal condition, hovering just overhead and watching the scene of crisis in a mood of detachment. The beginning of the otherworld journey proper is signaled by the advent of a guide, and by motifs of visionary topography and travel, such as paths, valleys, and tunnels. The guide, who is the narrator's *alter ego*, escorts the visionary from place to place, pushing the story forward and interpreting the inner significance of otherworld scenes; he thus calls attention to the symbolic character of the other world, and to the need for spiritual instruction in this life and the next.

In the pivotal episode of both medieval and modern journeys, the visionary confronts himself through various graphic representations. He meets his thoughts, words, and deeds, learns the weight of his soul, or reviews his life in a book, play, or movie—and in such fashion brings judgment upon himself.

Although medieval hell and purgatory scenes find scarcely any counterparts in the near-death testimony collected by Moody and his colleagues, motifs of paradise topography are much the same

in both periods: shining edifices, gardens, meadows, heavenly cities, and so forth. In addition, the ultimate experience of contemplative vision, though treated only rarely and briefly by medieval otherworld journey narratives, is consistently described as a comprehensive vision of the whole, in which cognitive and affective powers fuse. It is a moment when the dramatic action of the otherworld journey seems to be suspended and unmediated awareness floods in; but an instant later the play resumes, a message is formulated, and the visionary feels compelled, against his desires, to return to life.

Upon revival, the visionary is physically and spiritually changed. Retacent and overwhelmed at first, he is eventually persuaded to communicate his discoveries and share his mission with others. Once an ordinary *vir quidam*, average guy, or “just a housewife,” the visionary takes on a prophetic role, teaching by word and by the example of a transformed life.

Also in both periods the otherworld journey narrative evolves through the visionary’s conversation with others, and the narrator shapes the account to conform to the conventions of the genre in which it will appear, whether sermon, allegory, chronicle, Christian polemic, contemporary best seller, tabloid testimonial, statistical study, or television talk show. Yet in all those different formats, the vision story retains its didactic aim: the other world is not described to satisfy theoretical curiosity, but to serve as a goad toward transformation.

There is bound to be disagreement over whether these recurrent motifs—guides, paths, barriers, encounters with deeds, and so forth—comprise a universal lexicon, or whether they provide only the syntactic structure of the otherworld vision. Many of these areas of similarity appear to be formal rather than substantial, for when we fill in the picture, supplying the emotional content and the culturally specific features that make up a concrete vision, we discover significant divergences.

Thus, despite the structural resemblance between descriptions of the soul’s exit from the body, we find that medieval visions exemplify the “two deaths” theme (i.e., different fates for saints and sinners), while modern visions portray only the comforting prospect of a good death. So, too, although the guide is essential in both periods as a narrative expedient, didactic instrument, guardian of the threshold, and psychopomp, his character and relation to the visionary are understood quite differently. In medieval visions, the guide stands for hierarchical and feudal authority; in modern visions, he represents benevolent parental acceptance. His role appears to be shaped by

cultural presuppositions about social and family structure, judicial process, education, and pastoral or psychological cure of souls.

The most glaring difference is the prominence, in medieval accounts, of obstacles and tests, purificatory torments, and outright doom. Aside from continuing the hellfire traditions of early Christian apocalyptic, medieval narratives serve as vehicles for the consolidation of Catholic teachings on purgatory and penance. In modern accounts, on the other hand, a sense of inevitable progress softens the rigors of final reckoning; the review of deeds is transformed from an ordeal into an educational experience; and the only serious obstacle is the barrier marking the point of no return. These narratives are shaped throughout by optimistic, democratic, "healthy-minded" principles that transparently reveal a contemporary ideology and mood.

The contrast to medieval accounts is sharpened when we set near-death narratives against the background of nineteenth- and twentieth-century spiritualism and its intellectual offshoot, the psychical research movement. The spiritualist other world, like that of near-death literature is a social utopia, directly mirroring the progressive causes with which many spiritualists and psychical researchers have been connected: prison, insane-asylum, and school reform, abolition, feminism, socialism, Christian perfectionism, and other high-minded liberal concerns have been vindicated by mediumistic and clairvoyant descriptions of the ideal conditions of the spirit world (Lawton, 1932; Nelson, 1969; Turner, 1974; Moore, 1977).

Although ours is a less fertile period for generating utopian schemes, near-death literature expresses and provides otherworld validation for similar progressivist ideas. It is no wonder, then, that it provokes the ire of conservative religious thinkers, whose objections to current near-death studies echo the earlier reactions against spiritualism (Moore, 1977, pp. 40-69).

In its otherworld cosmology, as well, near-death literature is as close to spiritualism as it is distant from medieval visions. Medieval vision narratives, as we saw, are the fruit of a long history of development and suppression of cosmological schemes for the soul's journey to God; as such, they retain vestiges, sometimes sublimated or confused, of older conceptions of the planetary spheres as places of interrogation and punishment. Naturally, this is a completely foreign idiom for modern accounts; near-death literature reflects instead a short history of attempts to reconcile the spirit world with the world of Faraday, Maxwell, Darwin, and Einstein. Though less inclined than spiritualism to localize the other world in the outer atmosphere, modern narratives make similar use of scientific



vocabulary: energy, magnetism, vibrations, dimensions, evolution, now supplemented by terms drawn from relativity theory, quantum mechanics, and holography to update the imaginative cosmology.

In focusing on the reports of those who return from death, however, modern accounts are closer to their medieval counterparts than to spiritualist literature. The return-from-death story, unlike mediumistic accounts of the afterlife, conforms to the pattern of a conversion narrative. Rather than mapping the spirit world in great detail, the return-from-death story places emphasis on the visionary's special task, on the message he is charged to bring back to humanity, and on the transformation of his way of life.

On the other hand, medieval and modern narratives differ considerably in their understanding of the nature of the visionary's message, commission, and conversion. Moral rehabilitation is too vague a goal for medieval visions; they are concerned, as we have seen, to promote particular penitential and monastic institutions. Modern narratives, however, advocate the renunciation of worries and fears and conversion to a life of love, learning, and service; this is an individualistic, anti-institutional, humanistic ideal, of which churches, hospices, and other service organizations may be the incidental beneficiaries. Considered closely, then, the differences between medieval and modern accounts of return-from-death conversion are as impressive as the similarities.

These comparative observations force us to conclude that the visionaries of our own age are no more free of cultural influence than those of less pluralistic eras. We have seen that the otherworld journey story—which comprises every level of the experience to which we have access, as well as every layer of narrative reconstruction—is through and through a work of the socially conditioned religious imagination; it is formed in conversation with society, even if it takes place in the solitude of the deathbed and in the private chamber of inner experience.

Once we recognize this, we lose the right to insist that *Life After Life* (Moody, 1975), Gregory's *Dialogues* (Gregory the Great, 1959), or any other work of visionary eschatology paints a true picture of what occurs at the extreme border of life. If we wish to avoid the self-defeating extremes of shallow relativism and naive affirmation, then our only recourse is to focus on the imaginative and symbolic character of otherworld visions.

The remainder of this paper will consider whether that approach can yield a fuller understanding of near-death literature and of visionary and religious testimony in general. I should explain at the outset, however, that I am not attempting to provide a systematic

theory of near-death visions. Such a theory would require the collaborative efforts of many different interpreters. Perhaps, as with other questions that affect human destiny, the solution to the puzzle of near-death experience will always remain in the distance, drawing us along by receding as we approach it. What I offer here is not a conclusion designed to close the book on the subject, but a set of suggestions and thought-experiments intended to point out promising directions for further inquiry.

Although this discussion is preliminary and open-ended, it is guided by certain assumptions about the symbolic character of religious discourse; in case these assumptions are not apparent, I will make them explicit.

In speaking of symbolism, I have in mind a definition that the reader may not share, but may be willing to grant for the purpose of discussion. According to most dictionaries, a symbol is an image or object that represents something beyond itself. To this minimal definition I would add—following the view expressed in various ways by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Paul Tillich, Ernst Cassirer, Suzanne Langer, and Paul Ricoeur, among others—that a symbol participates in the reality that it represents. It does not copy or fully contain that reality, but it does communicate some of its power. Unlike a metaphor, it cannot be translated adequately into conceptual terms.

By “religious imagination,” I understand the capacity to create or to appreciate religious symbols. In this study, we have caught a glimpse of some of the features of the religious imagination. We have seen that it works not only with universal patterns—such as death and birth—but also with culturally specific and idiosyncratic material, and that it can fuse the universal with the particular into a seamless narrative whole.

Connected to this understanding of symbol and religious imagination is an assumption about the nature of religious discourse and of theology. Theology, as I understand it, is a discipline of critical reflection on religious experience and religious language. As such, no matter how objective or systematic it becomes, it cannot escape the fundamental limitations that apply to religious discourse in general.

To put it bluntly, I do not believe that any of our notions of God, the soul, or the other world are likely to be true in the ordinary sense of the word. One reason for this is human weakness: we are too thick-headed, twisted, or frightened to see clearly. Another reason, which perhaps brings less discredit, is that we have no mode of expression that combines the virtues of analytic and symbolic thought: our concepts are too abstract and one-dimensional, while

our images and symbols are too concrete; we sense that both modes of understanding are necessary, yet they seem incompatible. For this and other reasons that have been adduced by countless philosophers and religious thinkers, there is no sensory, imaginative, or intellectual form capable of fully expressing the transcendent. We can intuit and be forever changed by a higher reality, but we cannot apprehend or describe it in the direct and unequivocal manner with which we seem to know the objects of ordinary experience. Such understanding as we do receive of the transcendent comes to us through symbols, and it is through symbols that we communicate this understanding to one another.

Thus, although theology involves analytic thought, its fundamental material is symbol. Its task is to assess the health of our symbols; for when one judges a symbol, one cannot say whether it is true or false, but only whether it is vital or weak. When a contemporary theologian announces, for example, that God is dead or that God is not only Father but also Mother, he or she is not describing the facts *per se*, but is evaluating the potency of our culture's images for God—their capacity to evoke a sense of relationship to the transcendent.

To say that theology is a diagnostic discipline is also to say that its method is pragmatic. In evaluating religious ideas and images, theology deals with ranges of experience that cannot be verified—that even overflow our normal categories of thought. One need not abandon the idea that there is an ultimate truth in order to recognize that for now, at least, pragmatic criteria must be used. If we have no direct sensory or conceptual access to the reality for which we aim, then we must judge those images and ideas valid that serve a remedial function, healing the intellect and the will. In this sense, all theology is pastoral theology, for its proper task is not to describe the truth but to promote the quest for truth.

I suggest, therefore, that a pragmatic method and a sensitivity to symbol must go hand in hand if we wish to give a fair hearing to the claims of near-death literature. If we fully recognize the symbolic nature of near-death testimony (and accept the limits that imposes upon us), then in the end we will be able to accord it a value and a validity that would not otherwise be possible; that in turn will yield further insight into the visionary, imaginative, and therapeutic aspects of religious thought in general.

### CORPOREAL IMAGERY

The advantage of paying close attention to the way otherworld

visions reflect imaginative modes of thought becomes evident as soon as we try to access visionary accounts of the soul's exit from the body. We have seen that near-death reports, like their medieval predecessors, presume an old-fashioned dualism of the sort that most contemporary philosophers and theologians find inadequate to deal with the complexities of mind-body interaction. For some, this makes it difficult to take near-death visions seriously. A philosophy professor told me that although he was fascinated by near-death studies, he would hate to have to give up his hard-won sophistication and go back to thinking of the soul as "housed in the body like an oyster in a shell." He could not decide whether to listen to his philosophical training or to the empirical data of out-of-body experience; one or the other would have to go.

Fortunately, however, a third alternative becomes available if we perform what I have called the "Copernican revolution" of regarding the other world as the domain of imagination, and interpret its features accordingly. Without requiring adherence to any particular school of philosophical or psychological idealism, this revolution or change in perspective allows us to reclaim a whole range of imagery and experiential testimony that we might otherwise have to reject on theoretical grounds. Not only dualism and somatomorphism, but also personification imagery, theatrical and cosmological symbolism, and externalization of deeds can be understood and valued as imaginative forms rather than descriptive models. They provide coherent patterns for dramatizing inner experience, yet they entail no particular metaphysics. They have a logic of their own, but if we try to grasp them in theoretical terms, we lay hold of nothing but confusion; and, like other category errors, this can lead to unwarranted skepticism.

Several vexing issues are clarified, then, by viewing otherworld visions as artifacts of the imagination; most important, it should silence those critics who invoke the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" or similar vetoes against the claims of near-death literature. If the other world is the inner world projected on the stage of the imagined cosmos, then here, if anywhere, is the place where concrete and graphic, embodied and animated principles belong. When we think theoretically, we must guard against spatializing and hypostatizing our ideas; but it is possible that we could not think creatively at all if we lacked the capacity to imagine, perhaps only subliminally, a realm in which our ideas can act. For this reason, I have suggested that many symbolic and even metaphorical expressions refer latently to another world.

The concrete imagery of near-death visions is dictated not only

by their imaginative character, but also by their narrative quality. The otherworld journey, as we have seen, is at its very roots a story. In order to fulfill its narrative purpose of engaging interest and its didactic purpose of moving the audience from ideology to action, it must portray the afterlife as an active realm, and the soul as a protagonist whose experiences epitomize and interpret those of earthly life. If the soul must take on the shape of the body for that purpose, then so be it; it would make a dull story indeed if near-death visions had to conform to the requirements of abstract philosophical theology.

In the context of religious story-telling, then, it is not necessarily a sign of advancement if, in deference to subtler understandings of spiritual perfection, we pluck off the limbs, erase the features, and shave our image of the soul into a bald, symmetrical bit of geometry, incapable of motion or life. The same is true of images of the divine; attempts to picture God as transcending time, space, and gender often end by making God appear disembodied, neuter, and inert. In either case, the religious imagination is at work; the only question is whether it works vigorously, harnessed and disciplined by spiritual practice, or whether it works lamely, hindered by misplaced theoretical scruples.

Perhaps, then, there is no need to forgo speaking of the divine or the self in ways that feed the imagination. This is the view William Blake endorsed, when he urged us to imagine God as a person rather than a metaphysical principle (Blake, 1971, p. 434):

God Appears & God is Light  
To those poor Souls who dwell in Night,  
But does a Human Form Display  
To those who Dwell in Realms of day.

As an antidote to the poisoning of academic theology by rationalist prejudices, Blake's attitude is welcome; but in his insistence on anthropomorphism, he exaggerated. The point is to give up dull abstractions, not to side with one form of imagery against another. Even our most vivid images of God and the soul are bound to stiffen with time and require revision or outright dismantling. Corporeal imagery can have a tyrannizing effect, as St. Augustine discovered during the long period in which he struggled to free himself from a childishly materialist understanding of God, good, and evil; sometimes what is most needed is a fresh gust of iconoclasm, a healthy disdain for imaginative forms. When an archetype degenerates into a stereotype, then the laws of religious imagination no longer bind us to it, but call on us to register the changes that

a new situation demands. At its best, theology is the art of detecting and serving these changing needs of religious symbol systems; thus, it proceeds by a rhythm of creation and destruction, rather than by the progressive conquest of truth.

To view theology in this way, as essentially a therapeutic rather than theoretic discipline, makes it easier to come to terms with religious change while still maintaining respect for tradition. Religious teaching is an art, an activity, and an interaction with others; doctrine is only its byproduct. A gifted religious teacher is not only able to transmit a tradition, but also to read the historical and personal situation and respond in kind, spontaneously discerning what is required. Similarly, the various modes of speculative and systematic religious thought that we call theology succeed when they are attuned to the needs of their times. What is called for is not a shallow pursuit of “relevance” for its own sake, but a balance between preservation and innovation. Theology should be forceful enough to maintain links to the authoritative sources and stored wisdom of the past, and at the same time flexible enough to alter doctrinal formulas for the sake of progress or reformation in religious life. Such flexibility is possible only if we acknowledge that theology, like the primary acts of religious teaching and inquiry on which it reflects, has to do not with truth-telling but with truth-seeking.

That is especially true of eschatological doctrines; within every major tradition they vary greatly not only in ideological content but also in the extent to which they permit the imagination to visualize a concrete other world. If we recognize that religious teaching is a therapeutic art, then we can see the value of teachings that are evasive on the subject of an afterlife—from Jesus’s parabolic sayings about the Kingdom of God to Thoreau’s insistence on “one world at a time”—yet we can still appreciate the elaborate depictions of heaven and hell that form a Christian legacy in sermon, scholastic *sententia*, and cathedral stone. We can acknowledge that the Buddha, as “Supreme Physician,” wisely diagnosed the condition of his audience when he refused to satisfy their curiosity about the destiny of saints after death, and kept silence on the other leading metaphysical issues of his day; yet we need not consider the Pure Land sect, with its lush representations of the Western Paradise, a betrayal of the *dharma*.

Gregory the Great, whose voice has been so prominent in the Christian literature of the other world, spoke directly to this point (1874, Part 3, Prologue, p. 128):

The medicine that lessens one disease adds force to another; and the bread that enhances the life of the strong destroys that of little ones. Therefore the speech of teachers should be shaped according to the condition of the hearers.

In the contemporary context, religious thinkers who sit in judgment on traditional or newly coined conceptions of God, the soul, or immortality, should consider the situation in which they occur, rather than evaluating them on narrow intellectualist grounds.

### THE QUESTION OF INTERPRETATION

The present study has alerted us to the need to take into account the imaginative, narrative, didactic, and therapeutic character of eschatological visionary literature; and in doing so, it has yielded a guiding principle for the interpretation of religious discourse in general. The virtue of this approach is that it not only helps us to come to terms with the varied religious expressions of our own culture, but also contributes to our effort to understand other traditions. Recognizing the imaginative character of religious utterances does not mean that we give up our faith in an ultimate and objective truth, but it does allow us to stop pitting one set of beliefs against another. It means that the hope for rapprochement among the world's religions does not depend on our ability to identify areas of conceptual agreement or to dissolve apparent differences into a vague consensus. Moreover, it is an aid to historical self-awareness to learn, as the study of near-death narratives makes plain, that we are not yet cut off from our myth-making past. Like our ancestors, and like people of other cultures today, we come into contact with reality in ways that are shaped by language, social structure, geography, and weather, along with the particular forces that differentiate us from our neighbors. If we can appreciate this in ourselves, we can appreciate it in others. We need not strip the temples and divest the gods in order to discover affinities between different religious world-views.

Yet the benefits of this outlook can be ours only if we are willing to renounce the notion that an original and essential religious experience can be discriminated from subsequent layers of cultural shaping. This is the error in method against which theologian Gordon Kaufman warned us (1975, p. 6):

Our "religious experience," whatever this turns out to be, is never a raw, pre-conceptual, pre-linguistic experience, the undialectical foundation on which theology can be built. It (like all the rest of experience) is always



a construction or composite, heavily dependent for its form and qualities on the learned terms and concepts which give it particular flavor and shape.

In a sense, the effect of this observation can be to protect the integrity of experiential testimony. If we heed Kaufman's rejection of the notion of raw experience, then we will not make the assumption that the visionary who sees Christ or Krishna is only "labelling" an underlying experience that can be described more accurately and directly as encounter with a "being of light" or the "higher self." As I suggested earlier, such modern expressions may be more palatable, but they are no less culturally determined or mythically cultivated.

For Kaufman, the fact that we can have no access to uncultivated religious experience means that theology should be viewed as an act of deliberate imaginative construction, taking its materials from reflection on our language and social experience, rather than from private oracles. The advantage of this position is that it calls on religious thinkers to acknowledge and take responsibility for their own reflective and creative work in framing ideas of the universe and of God. Its disadvantage is primarily a practical one: if we follow Kaufman's suggestion that theology should be related to but not rooted in individual religious experience, then we run the risk of widening the gap between the amateur theologian who examines his own experience in the search for truths, and the professional who knows better.

Indeed, it is already the case that academic theologians tend to avoid questions of inner experience, rather than risk privatism, subjectivism, or the transgression of Kantian boundaries; yet that is happening at a time when—to judge by the success of *Life After Life* and other books that concern individual spiritual experience—the wider public is hungry for theoretical and practical guidance in precisely that area.<sup>2</sup> Just as scholars are becoming more sophisticated about the social character of religion, the social context for religion is growing increasingly individualistic. For many people, personal experience seems to be the only available arena for religious discovery, and the only guide for choosing among the dizzying array of competing world-views and paths. Under the pressures of secularism and pluralism, religion is more than ever a matter of "what the individual does with his own solitariness" (Whitehead, 1926/1960, p. 16). There has never been a period in which undue skepticism about religious experience could be more damaging.

All of this has a bearing on the problem of interpreting otherworld visions; for if we wish to maintain a middle path between reductionism and naivete, then we must mediate between the

impersonalism of social theories that stress the coerciveness of language and culture at the expense of individual experience, and the exaggerated individualism of earlier interpreters such as William James (1901-02/1958) and Henri Bergson (1935), who disregarded the social side of religion in favor of its private dimension and its solitary “geniuses.”<sup>3</sup> Since debates are often muddled by unacknowledged differences in usage, it will clarify our task to discriminate three ways in which the terms “social” and “individual” can apply to religious experience:

1. Religious experience is invariably social in that religious life and thought are shaped by linguistic and social forces; for that reason, Clifford Geertz (1973) defined religion as a “cultural system.”

2. Religious traditions reflect and promote social order and, in many cultures, tend to value the group over the individual. In archaic societies, according to Mircea Eliade, religious experience is profoundly unindividualistic—the individual feels his identity securely only when merged with the community, reenacting the mythical acts of its foundation, purging himself of idiosyncrasy. Many of the historical religious traditions also have a communal focus; the Hebrew Bible is the story of a people’s response to God’s acts rather than the diary of a solitary seeker. Yet the extent to which religious experience is communal depends on the degree and quality of social cohesion in a given group. The social character of religious experience, understood in this sense, is a variable rather than a constant. Therefore, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith has argued (1978, p. 177), it can be misleading to generalize about the fundamental significance of religious community on the basis of a particular situation. To make archaic religion on the standard is no more reasonable than to suppose, as James did, that the separation between personal and institutional religion that characterized his own intellectual milieu should stand for all time and apply to all forms of religious experience.

3. Religious experience is invariably individual in that, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith has also said, “to be religious is an ultimately personal act.” No matter how communal their society may be, human beings are essentially alone in the experience of life and death and in the encounter with transcendent values. This is as constant as the fact of social conditioning (#1), and is not altered by changing conditions of social structure. Individual experience may not be the locus of authority, but it is the touchstone for authenticity; in this sense, the opposite of “individual” is not “social,” but “insincere.”

In interpreting contemporary near-death literature, therefore, we can say without contradiction that it records the genuine and irreducibly personal experiences of individuals (#3), that it is

nonetheless a product of the social religious imagination (#1), and that one sign of its social character is its individualistic message (#2). If we keep these three rudimentary distinctions in mind, then our awareness of the cultural shaping of near-death testimony need not lead to relativism or skepticism. The anti-reductionist principle of judging religious experience by its fruits rather than its origins applies as well to current sociological insights as it does to the “medical materialism” against which William James battled.

Having cleared the way by defending near-death testimony against the new reductionisms of social science, we are free to apply pragmatic criteria toward interpreting the content of near-death visions. As I suggested earlier, a pragmatic method is ideally suited for dealing with testimony that cannot be verified in other ways. If there is any validity to religious accounts of life or death, it is not because they provide a direct transcript of the truth, but only because they act as a lure toward truth, by leading people out of anxious, mechanical, or vicious patterns of thought and behavior. As long as our religious ideas and images perform this leading function, and do not falsify our experience along the way, then we can say, with James, that they are “true in so far forth” (1975, pp. 98-103).

It is important to recognize that we can use this pragmatic approach without necessarily embracing James’s pragmatic theory of truth; it is perfectly legitimate to combine a common-sense “correspondence” model of truth with pragmatic criteria for testing the validity of religious truth claims. We should not adopt James’s pragmatic method, however, without stretching it to include attention to the workings of the religious imagination and the cultural forces that shape it. When James judged the practical consequences of an idea, he often did so in general terms, without considering its particular, historical implications. That means that he failed to do justice to ideas that are colored by situations with which he was not familiar. For example, when he criticized the notion of the Absolute, calling it a pallid substitute for the richness of a pluralistic universe, James was primarily addressing the intellectual situation of the modern West; he gave only passing recognition to the fact that the Absolute served early Greek philosophers as the aim of a religious quest and as a means of liberation from more pluralistic, but less vital and inclusive outlooks. To be truly pragmatic, one must also take into account such historical elements. The “cash value” of a religious conception depends on the state of the economy in which it is circulated, and cannot be measured against any universal rate of exchange. With that in mind, I have criticized theological

interpretations of near-death literature that do not take into account its particular implications for our culture.

We cannot return to James, then, but we can combine a Jamesian respect for the validity of individual religious experience with a greater sensitivity to the cultural shaping of that experience. We can expand his pragmatic method by incorporating into it an appreciation of the symbolic and therapeutic character of religious discourse. Having made this methodological excursion, we can turn to the task of interpreting near-death visions with a renewed sense of the rightness of treating them as socially conditioned, imaginative, and yet nonetheless real and revelatory experiences.

That is the approach that allows us to respect the visionary's claim that he or she experienced death, even if the "death" did not meet medical criteria. It is enough to know that the shock of extreme danger or expected death opened the person to a discovery of what death means to the person at the core of his or her being. When the visionary stepped onto the stage of the other world—which is the inner world, turned inside out—the visionary confronted his or her own deeply held image and presentiment of death, perhaps just as he or she will at the time of actual death. Thus we can say, in the fullest possible sense, that the visionary "met his death."

Indeed, it is no accident that the ordinary expression "he met his death" is compatible with the testimony of near-death visionaries. Here is one instance in which our language preserves a vestige of otherworld journey imagery in a saying that, though commonplace, nonetheless retains a vital charge. Dormant in our everyday speech, the expression has the potential to spring into a full-blown imaginative or visionary experience; its potency is a sign that the traditional and folkloristic view of death as a symbolic encounter still has resonance for us. If we recognize this, then the testimony of near-death visionaries will begin to seem less foreign. On the basis of this common ground of imaginative experience, we have reason to accord some validity to the visionary's claims. Certainly this is a more fruitful and more humane approach than the applications of external medical tests.

The same logic applies to the conviction of having survived death. Though it proves nothing about our own prospects for life beyond the grave, we are entitled to accept an individual's report that he experienced something in himself that surpasses death. Given the immense practical significance of this claim, it would be foolish to deny it solely because of scientific opinions. Science can hardly have the last word on a subject about which it has so little to say, and the transforming effects of near-death experiences speak for

themselves.

So the benefits of reading visionary testimony as a work of the imagination keep accumulating; and if we move on to consider the near-death vision as a narrative whole, its immunity against reductionist criticism becomes even stronger. We have seen that arguments against the validity of visionary experience depend on analyzing it into component parts. As Gordon Kaufman said of religious experience in general, so the critics of near-death research remind us that near-death experience is a composite, and that its individual elements may be “explained” by distribution to various physical, psychological, and social facts.

Yet it is our prerogative as imaginative beings to form meaningful wholes out of the elements of sensation, perception, language, memory, and so forth that we are given. Imagination, which Coleridge called the power “to shape into one,” fuses these bits of experience into a dramatic sequence, aimed toward a destination, and therefore not reducible to their origin. Thus, in acts of telling and retelling, the near-death experience takes shape as a unified and unifying whole. Once that narrative integrity is achieved, no amount of analytical dissection can destroy it.

The immunity this affords us is lost, however, the moment we try to verify near-death experience by isolating veridical elements, ruling out pathological causes, or breaking it down into statistics. Paradoxically, the very method that permits us to respect visionary testimony prohibits us from using it to make a case for survival. To that extent, we must frustrate the truth-claims for near-death literature.

In every respect, our defense of near-death reports depends on treating them as symbolic expressions that can never be translated into conceptual terms capable of objective verification. Perhaps that will prove a disappointment to those who wish to have their doubts about life after death resolved, but it has positive religious implications as well, for it requires us to give up our insistence on objective verification (which has been the source of so much grief throughout history) and to cultivate an appreciation of symbol in its place. Instead of regretting the fact that religious experience is symbolic rather than descriptive, we might well rejoice that the truth empties itself into our human language and cultural forms. The desire to strip away those forms, in the belief that they merely embellish, veil, or obstruct the truth would be, in effect, a revival of the Docetist heresy.

Hence, even if we grant that near-death visions convey something real, there is no reliable way to formulate what that “something” is. We cannot take a consensus of the visionaries; their visions are

too culturally specific. We cannot crack their symbolic code, and we know before we start that every explanation or interpretation, however thoughtful, will leave the essential mystery untouched. Therefore, as the remainder of this paper will suggest, we can appropriate the messages of near-death literature only in an indirect fashion; and yet that may prove to be no insignificant thing.

### ANOTHER WORLD TO LIVE IN

The narrative integrity of near-death visions derives not only from the fact that a story is told, but also, and more importantly, from the fact that the story has an aim. What seems at first glance to be a visionary travelogue describing for the curious the sights of an exotic supernatural realm, turns out to be the story of a conversion experience; and, as we have seen, its main purpose is to communicate to others the new insights won by the convert.

Otherworld vision stories resemble conversion narratives in two respects. First, and most obvious, they trace the protagonist's recovery from a condition of sin, melancholy, malaise—or from death itself, which is the fundamental reference point and emblem for all states of despair. Modern near-death narratives give us deliverance without conviction of sin, but they follow the conversion pattern nonetheless, often beginning with an allusion to the protagonist's long-standing enslavement to fear of death, and ending, as the medieval narratives do, with an account of his regenerated way of life. The death-first pattern of contemporary reports thus serves a function similar to that of the hell-first pattern of medieval narratives.

The second, and more intriguing, parallel between conversion experience and near-death visions is the way in which inner transformation colors perceptions of the outer world. Not only do otherworld visions resemble conversion, but, in this respect, conversion narratives resemble otherworld visions. William James suggested as much in his discussion of conversion, when he pointed out that a sudden sense of inward illumination can spill over into the landscape, saturating it with beauty, light, newness, vitality, and harmony. James's prime example for that was Jonathan Edwards's account (quoted in James, 1901-02/1958, Lecture 10) of his own conversion experience, in which the face of nature seemed to change, and the voice of thunder was transformed from a dreadful summons into a sweet invitation. James also cited several anonymous witnesses who entered the "state of assurance" under the auspices of evangelical revival; the following narrative, taken from E. D. Starbuck (James, 1901-02/1958, p. 200), is representative:

It was like entering another world, a new state of existence. Natural objects were glorified, my spiritual vision was so clarified that I saw beauty in every material object in the universe, the woods were vocal with heavenly music; my soul exulted in the love of God, and I wanted everybody to share in my joy.

For a secular variation on the same theme, we can turn to Gustav Fechner, the philosopher whom James admired, who attained to his “daylight view” of the panpsychic intelligence of plants and planets after emerging from a period of painful seclusion (1946, p. 211):

I still remember well what an impression it made upon me when, after suffering for some years from an ailment which affected my sight, I stepped out for the first time from my darkened chamber and into the garden with no bandage upon my eyes. It seemed to me like a glimpse beyond the boundary of human experience. Every flower beamed upon me with a peculiar clarity, as though into the outer light it was casting a light of its own. To me the whole garden seemed transfigured, as though it were not I but nature that had just arisen. And I thought: So nothing is needed but to open the eyes afresh, and with that old nature is made young again.

In this passage there converges a whole array of literal and metaphoric conversion and otherworld journey motifs. We might compare it to the account by Alphonse Ratisbonne, quoted by James (1901-02/1958, Lecture 10), which likens a sudden conversion experience to emerging “from a sepulchre, from an abyss of darkness,” and finding that “in an instant the bandage had fallen from my eyes.” But the special charm of Fechner’s account is that these age-old symbols of awakening and renewed sight—exit from a darkened chamber, having a covering drop from the eyes, entering a luminous garden—here take a literal form. The same is true of near-death narratives, in which the literal sense comes to rest not on bandages or gardens, but on the passage from death into life, from the darkened chamber of the body and its lidded vision, to the lucid garden which, as Fechner put it, “lies beyond the wall of this world.”

William James held that the principle by which a conversion experience transfigures the landscape can also operate in reverse, in a melancholic refiguring of the world that strips it of value, interest, and hence of visual allure; and we have seen that this is the chief feature of what psychologists now call “depersonalization,” the condition that resembles and yet is the very antithesis of visionary near-death experience. According to James, this is more than a psychological principle; he maintained that our exalted or depressed states, assisted by our ideals, beliefs, doubts, and philosophic opinions, positively shape the character of the world. Not only con-

version, but all meaningful experience has the power to endow the environment with reality and value, just as pathological, disordered, or lethargic states of mind correspondingly denature it.<sup>4</sup>

Considered in this way, the otherworld vision seems less bizarre; though exceptional, it is part of the normal range of religious, and, in the sense just mentioned, even of ordinary experience. As a special form of conversion experience, in which the landscape is transfigured as a corollary of subjective transformation, the visionary journey dramatizes the way imagination contributes to our perception of the world. To use a Blakean analogy, imagination plays the demiurge and—with its skill enhanced by the visionary's exalted state—creates a new world to dwell in, or restores the natural world to its Edenic exemplar.

If that is true, it still does not mean that we can decode the features of otherworld topography by tracing them to particular states or objects of mind. Attempts to do so usually betray dogmatic assumptions; thus Freudian Geza Roheim (1930/1972) saw phallic imagery in the architecture of the other world, while psychopharmacologist Ronald Siegel (1980) related it to optic and mnemonic structures, and Swedenborg (1897) proposed an elaborate system of correspondences in which houses and cities are thoughts, animals and birds are affections, gardens are ordered ideas, and so forth. If we inclined to adopt a Jungian approach, or to apply the teachings of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz, 1957), which counsels the deceased to recognize his afterlife visions as a projection of the mind's own radiance, we must be conscious that it will cost us our impartiality. Nor does the "intentional" character of otherworld visions call for any particular brand of philosophical idealism or endorse any special school of phenomenology; to enter these intellectual frameworks requires a large added step.

The main conclusion we can draw, without committing ourselves to such a step, is that the other world—in its literal and metaphoric forms—plays a significant role in our imaginative appropriation of moral and religious ideals. George Santayana, though no friend of literal eschatologies, implied that in his famous definition of religion (quoted in Geertz, 1973):

Any attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular. . . . Thus every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy; its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life. The vistas it opens and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in; and another world to live in—whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or not—is what we mean



by having a religion.

Like Fechner's statement, the passage owes its potency to the way it compacts metaphorical and literal senses. Santayana seems to suggest that myth, ritual, conversion, moral improvement, and other aspects of religious life are ultimately related to a primitive—and perhaps consciously repudiated—understanding of the other world as an actual place. For those of us who have abandoned thinking about other worlds, that produces a shock of recognition, demonstrating that our metaphorical ways of having “another world to live in” exert their power on the imagination only because we continue, at least subliminally, to visualize a literal other world. It is better to acknowledge that, and look for its possible benefits, than to ignore it and be unconsciously determined by it. The chief virtue of our tendency to conceive of another world may be that it provides a sense of orientation in this world, through which we would otherwise stagger without direction.

## ORIENTATION

In the otherworld vision literature we have considered, conversion motifs merge with pilgrimage motifs because the journey to the next world is actually a guide for pilgrimage through life. The maps of death and afterlife that those accounts convey are meant to help us get our bearings, right now, in relation to the cosmos in which we dwell, or wish to dwell.

Biologists Peter and Jean Medawar have expressed that point (quoted in Popper and Eccles, 1977, frontispiece):

Only human beings guide their behaviour by a knowledge of what happened before they were born and a preconception of what may happen after they are dead: thus only human beings find their way by a light that illumines more than the patch of ground they stand on.

Comparative study of religion shows that *Homo religiosus* has never found it sufficient to orient himself solely in terms of his place in local history, in the “rat race,” in private concerns that devour his energy. The imaginative cosmologies and eschatologies of different cultures testify to our human need to find a place to occupy in a wider universe.

That has not always been formulated in terms of life after death, however. Even the contemplation of death, unadorned by images of the beyond, can have an orienting effect insofar as it makes us place ourselves, with greater urgency and purpose, in the midst of

life; and a sense of the mystery of existence, of infinite presence or surrounding emptiness, can have the same value as a graphic depiction of the steps to paradise and hell. In that sense, Buddhist evocations of the inexhaustibly productive void are as well suited as Dante's *Divine Comedy* to respond to the need for orientation. The question they address is not necessarily "what was I before I was born, and what will I be when I die?" but rather, "where am I now in relation to the north, south, east, and west of the cosmos, the yesterday and tomorrow of history, the higher and lower ranks of being?" And the answer to that question can legitimately take many different forms, as long as it succeeds to some degree in correlating our position in the social order with our position in the cosmic order. Thus, I have suggested that otherworld journey narration is most likely to become prominent at times when a culture develops, or encounters through contact with other cultures, new perspectives on the social and natural universe that—until assimilated by the religious imagination—give rise to "cognitive dissonance" and spiritual dislocation.

For it is the religious imagination that turns map into cosmos and cosmos into home; and in visionary literature, that is accomplished by sending scouts to visit the farther reaches and return with eyewitness accounts that imaginatively appropriate the current world picture. Without such reports of actual experience, we seem to live in an unevaluated and desacralized universe.

If the otherworld journey is a way for the religious imagination to digest a culturally fashioned cosmology, then it is not surprising that such narratives, today as in the past, raise questions of a scientific order. The narrators who attempt to provide verification, according to the investigative canons of their day, are only extending that original impulse to link cosmology with imaginative experience. Although they may never achieve a profound synthesis of scientific and religious world-views, they are at least making an effort in that direction, unlike those religious thinkers who are so disenchanting by the failed alliances of the past that they look for religion only in those areas—such as ethics—that do not clash with scientific consensus.

Fortunately, those are not the only options. A third possibility, as Gordon Allport told us (1950, p. 132), is the "ceaseless struggle to assimilate the scientific frame of thought within an expanded religious frame." The intent of the present study has been to point the theological interpretation of near-death experience in this direction: acknowledging scientific and historical contributions without succumbing to positivism, taking experiential claims seriously, and

yet posing the question of verification on a deeper level.

We can sum up by saying that otherworld journey narratives orient us in two ways: as works of visionary topography, they provide an updated, culturally sanctioned picture of the cosmos, and as works of moral and spiritual instruction they call on us to inhabit that cosmos, by overcoming the fear or forgetfulness that make us as insensible to life as to death. All that is the action of the religious imagination, that power that makes our ideas and ideals come to life and act upon us. Although most of us do not seek visions (nor are we advised to do so by the visionary literature we have considered), we can at least respect the testimony of vision literature as an extreme instance of the legitimate imaginative ways in which one can instill a religious sense of the cosmos.

Yet, it is one thing to acknowledge in general terms the orienting value of otherworld visions, and it is quite another to decide whether their specific content might be relevant to our own view of life and death. In order to understand the conditions, both cultural and natural, that shape near-death experience, we have taken on the role of spectators, and cannot easily divest ourselves of that role. In comparing medieval and modern visions, we seem to have stepped outside of our own cultural context and may feel at a loss as to how to step back into it and make judgments. Such incapacity for wholehearted participation is the intellectual's occupational disease; among scholars engaged in the comparative study of religion it can produce a sense of nostalgia for days of innocence or for some idealized form of archaic or traditional religiosity.

Thus, when we try to evaluate near-death experience, we may feel stymied by our sophistication. We have gotten beyond reductionism to the extent that we can say of near-death visions, as William James said (1901-02/1958, p. 322) of mysticism, that they "usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come"; but we find ourselves effectively collared by the corollary that these revelations cannot legislate to—and hence, perhaps, cannot be shared with—the general public. The result is that those individuals whose understanding has been shaped by an overwhelming visionary experience seem to be isolated from the rest of us who are trying to make sense of things without the aid of immediate revelation.

To some extent, that is a necessary quarantine. At this stage, I see no justification for treating contemporary near-death testimony as the foundation for a new eschatology or religious movement. Near-death literature is at its best when it is modest and anecdotal; pressed into service as philosophy or prophecy, it sounds insipid. There is

no match here for the revelatory literature of the great religious traditions, and it is unlikely that a Gregory the Great or a Dante will emerge to shape near-death testimony into a religiously sophisticated or artistically ordered statement. Nor could the medieval visions we considered stand on their own; they thrived insofar as they exemplified a wider tradition.

In the end, a revelation is binding only if it binds; on a personal scale, it must organize life into a meaningful whole, without excluding other experiences. On a social scale, it must create or serve a community; and on that score, near-death testimony breaks down into private testaments that, despite their common features, cannot muster the collective energy to produce a coherent world view. Those who experience near-death visions, as well as those who are affected by hearing them, still face the problem of finding a community and a context in which to apply and search again for the insights they have received.

In our fragmented religious situation, the otherworld journey narrative has lost some of its orienting power. It can remind us of the need for orientation, the need to have a consecrated cosmos as the setting for a spiritual journey, but it cannot provide the means or material to accomplish this. We are thrown back on our own devices, our own partial and provisional solutions.

Under these circumstances, the most significant contribution made by near-death literature today may be that it puts in experiential terms questions about life and death that are so urgent as to call not for answers, but for a vital response. The moment of death—whether it is an imminent prospect or just an idea—still has a salutary shock value; it can make what James would call “live options” out of metaphysical notions that might otherwise seem remote, abstract, or obsolete.

If near-death literature is to have any prophetic value or evidential weight, that will be because it communicates insights capable of being verified—not in medical charts, but in our own experience. We may find no difficulty in respecting the testimony of those whose lives have been transformed by a near-death vision, but we can verify their discoveries only if, in some sense, we experience them for ourselves. The same can be said of other forms of religious testimony; for, unlike the generalizable truths of science, religious truths are true only insofar as religious people make them their own.

In that respect, there is no great distance between those who have experienced near-death visions and those who have only read them. The visionary—who must continually struggle to understand and not to betray this original vision—is in the same boat with the rest of

us. We are all in constant need of verifying our beliefs, whether they derive from personal experience or from venerated hearsay. A conviction that life surpasses death, however intensely felt, will eventually lose its vitality and become a mere fossil record, as alien as any borrowed doctrine, unless it is tested and rediscovered in daily life.

In addition, this study shows a fundamental kinship between otherworld visions and the more common forms of imaginative experience. Whether we fall into the “experiencer” or the “non-experiencer” category on a near-death survey, we are all, in a sense, otherworld travellers. Otherworld visions are products of the same imaginative power that is active in our ordinary ways of visualizing death, our tendency to portray ideas in concrete, embodied, and dramatic forms, the capacity of our inner states to transfigure our perception of outer landscapes, our need to internalize the cultural map of the physical universe, and our drive to experience that universe as a moral and spiritual cosmos in which we belong and have a purpose.

Whatever the study of near-death visions might reveal about the experience of death, it teaches us just as much about ourselves as image-making and image-bound beings. To admit this is no concession to the debunkers; on the contrary, by recognizing the imaginative character of otherworld visions, we have moved beyond the merely defensive posture of arguing against reductionism. Within the limits discussed in this paper, we are able to grant the validity of near-death testimony as one way in which the religious imagination mediates the search for ultimate truth.

## NOTES

1. Excerpted and adapted from “Otherworld Journeys: A Comparative Study of Medieval Christian and Contemporary Accounts of Near-Death Experience,” a PhD thesis presented to Harvard University, December 1983, to be published by Oxford University Press, 1986.
2. Theological discomfort with experiential claims has a long history, but in its current forms reflects the influence of such diverse thinkers as Hume, Kant, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, and Barth. In setting boundaries on the theoretical and practical use of reason, Kant established that God as Absolute cannot be an object of possible experience. Many theologians have since felt compelled to characterize religious experience as categorically different from all other kinds of experience, and hence not recognizably em-

pirical; or even to condemn interest in religious experience as a self-centered, idolatrous fixation that substitutes for pure faith. A pragmatic view of religious experience has the potential to release us from some of those vetoes; as William James pointed out, the God of religious experience is a More rather than a categorically transcendent All. Perhaps God is willing to descend from the status of "wholly other" in order to become available to human experience.

3. The sociological approach to cognitive religious claims reflects the influence of Marx, Weber, and especially Durkheim, who insisted that the reality expressed by religious symbols is primarily a social one and, as such, cannot be understood by introspection.
4. In putting forward that view, James occupied a theoretical position somewhere between the practical idealism of the optimistic Mind-Cure philosophies he described and criticized in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and the more complex doctrines of intentionality that have become the specialty of modern schools of phenomenological inquiry. The details of his position cannot be covered here; I have only extracted the general insights that are relevant to the interpretation of near-death testimony, and which are compatible with many different philosophical systems.

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## **The Darkness of God: An Account of Lasting Mystical Consciousness Resulting from an NDE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article describes the author's near-death experience (NDE) in 1983 as a result of poisoning. While the experience included few of the features that some researchers have held to be paradigmatic for deep NDEs its consequences were exceptionally profound, inasmuch as a continuing altered state of consciousness has resulted, requiring mystical language to do it justice. Almost every feature of the experience has been antithetical to the author's prior background, both in childhood and in adult life, thereby providing evidence against reductionist explanations of NDE. An account is given of how the new consciousness is affected by various life-circumstances, and of its practical impact on the quality of living.

At a time when popularizers are already making claims that NDEs tend to follow an "archtypal" pattern—autoscopic view of the body, journey through a tunnel or valley, emergence into a heavenly landscape or celestial radiance, life-review, encounters with "beings of light," regretful return to the body under instruction from higher powers, etc.—the following account sounds a cautionary note against premature pattern-making. My NDE in Thailand in 1983 had not a single one of these so-called paradigmatic features, yet its consequences seem to have been far more dramatic than any I have yet seen reported in the literature. The experience remains with me not merely as a memory, however vivid, nor merely as a changed attitude to life, however radical; it is still totally present as an almost palpable change of consciousness, a continuous "mystical" state that seems like "eternal life" *right now*, both waking and sleeping.

On the other hand, my experience also cuts across many of the arguments put forward by skeptics to explain NDEs away as dream-type experiences derived from birth memories (e.g., Sagan, 1979), childhood fantasies of heaven, or wish-fulfillment (Ehrenwald, 1974). I can speak with some authority about dreams, having been the husband and collaborator of a leading dream psychologist, Dr. Ann Faraday, for nearly two decades (Faraday, 1973 and 1976), and I can state categorically that the NDE was nothing like a dream either in its subjective quality nor, even more important, in its power to pro-

duce this extraordinary *continuing* state of consciousness. And to make clear how utterly at odds the experience was with my whole prior background, from birth to middle age, I will start this report with a thumbnail sketch of the life which the NDE itself did *not* review for me.

As far as birth is concerned, there is of course no way to know for certain how a neonate experiences entry into the world, but on any rational basis the arguments put forward in this journal by Carl Becker against Carl Sagan (Becker, 1982) would certainly apply in my case: I cannot imagine my emergence from the womb in a cold, gloomy English slum in the post-World-War-One depression years felt remotely like the blissful mystical experience I shall be describing here. After that, any religious fantasies in my cramped childhood could only have been of the Jesus-in-white-robos type derived from crude Sunday-school pictures, overshadowed by superstitious fear of a deity so autocratic that he had struck one of our neighbors blind (so my mother believed until her dying day) for uttering the good old English oath "Gorblimey." I rebelled against this superstition into fierce atheism when I encountered the writings of H.G. Wells in my school library, and dedicated myself to science, eventually following Wells's footsteps to Imperial College in the University of London at the start of World War II.

Later, while pursuing a career in industrial research and what is now known as "futurology" (Wren-Lewis, 1975), I came to take a more positive view of Christianity, but remained vehemently humanistic and anti-mystical, playing a leading role in the so-called "Death of God" movement in extreme liberal theology (Robinson, 1963; Wren-Lewis, 1958 and 1964). I dismissed all mysticism as neurotic escape-fantasy (Wren-Lewis, 1966). Even after I left industry in the early 1970s and crossed the Atlantic to teach religious studies and collaborate in my new wife's work with dreams, I remained at a loss to understand how so many educated people could possibly be interested in mysticism. My concern with dreams was from a totally down-to-earth, no-nonsense therapeutic viewpoint; I considered psychedelic drug experiences only mildly interesting, and I dismissed what I read about NDEs as mostly exercises in vivid imagination.

That, briefly, was the John Wren-Lewis who, in his sixtieth year, went for what he was expecting to be a nice quiet family rest in southern Thailand after emerging unscathed from an extended stay in the Malaysian jungle with the famous Senoi "dream-tribe" (Faraday and Wren-Lewis, 1984). When Ann and I, with our teenage

daughter, boarded a long-distance bus from Surat Thani in the east to Phuket in the west, we knew nothing of articles in the international press about thieves plying travelers with drugged sweets or drinks before making off with their wallets and luggage while they dozed, or of the sensational case where one pathological killer poisoned a whole coachload of people (Neville and Clarke, 1979). We heard one or two rumors, but having experienced nothing but generosity from everyone we'd met in our first month, we discounted them as scaremongering tales spread by hippies who'd eaten too many of the magic mushrooms that are on public sale everywhere in Thai resorts. We had no suspicions whatever of the nice young man who helped us with our luggage and then, on this crowded vehicle in broad daylight, offered us Cadbury's toffees. They tasted distinctly musty, but I sucked on to the (literally) bitter end out of politeness; Ann, less inhibited, spat hers out, and thanks to this I am now alive to tell the tale. For that particular thief evidently went in for injecting his toffees with overdoses, and had we both dozed off we would have slept our way to eternity, while our daughter sat oblivious at the front of the bus, unconcerned, like the other passengers, about her parents taking a "little nap."

When the thief saw Ann wasn't eating her sweet, he realized his plans were foiled and left the bus hastily at the next stop, just as I was beginning to feel drowsy. When my head dropped on my chest and I began to drool, Ann grasped what had happened but thought there was nothing to do now but let me sleep it off, so she stretched me out on the seat with a sleeping bag under my head. After a while, however, as the bus plunged on into the countryside, she noticed with alarm that I was going blue around the lips and had no detectable pulse. With difficulty she persuaded the driver to stop (he thought I was drunk), and after some hassle she and our daughter managed to flag down a van for a ride back to Surat Thani hospital. The doctors were not at all hopeful of saving me, but made the optimistic assumption that my total non-response to pain was due to the drug (they suspected morphine, which is very cheap in Thailand) rather than to imminent death, and plied me with oxygen and antidotes by intravenous drip. It was about seven hours before I showed any evidence of coming round, and they decided to put us all up for the approaching night in a private room.

It was some hours later still before I really surfaced, to find my daughter asking if I wanted supper. For some time after that I was so occupied with getting in touch with where I was and what had been going on that I just didn't think about anything else. Then, after my wife and daughter had gone to sleep, I began to wonder why

that rather shabby hospital room seemed transcendently beautiful. My first thought was, “Hey, is *this* why people get hooked on morphine?” but second thoughts told me that after all those hours any drug effects should have worn off (a conclusion since confirmed by leading drug experts I have consulted in Australia). What is more, I had taken part in a lot of research on psychedelic drugs in England in the late 1960s and had some experiences which many less skeptical people would have called religious, including one apparently transcendental vision of white light with LSD (Wren-Lewis, 1971), but the experience in the Surat Thani hospital room was totally different—altogether calmer, without any perceptual distortion, yet at the same time far more impressive. I began to wonder if I’d had some kind of NDE while I was “out,” so I tried a technique which Ann and I have sometimes found useful when we wake up knowing we have just had a vivid dream but cannot remember any details.

I lay on the bed, relaxed, and began to take myself back in imagination, by a series of steps, right to the point of coming round: “Here I am, lying on this bed, with my daughter asking if I want supper; here I am, with my eyes still closed, feeling my arm being shaken; here I am, just before that, and . . .” Often this process brings back the dream one has forgotten from just before waking, but what came back this time was nothing like a dream-memory. What came flooding back was an experience which in some extraordinary way was still with me, indeed *had been with me ever since I came round, without focusing on it until now*. It was as if I had come out of the deepest darkness I had ever known, which was somehow still there right behind my eyes.

One of the near-death experiences reported to Kenneth Ring (Ring, 1982) was from a woman who said she had been enveloped in “a very peaceful blackness . . . a soft, velvet blackness,” and I now know exactly why she went on to say that her later happiness, which astonished her friends in the hospital, was not just her reaction to being alive, but was “connected with that total peaceful blackness.” But I feel the need to say something even stronger to do justice to my experience. A phrase which has since come to mind is one I read in an ancient alchemical text quoted by Carl Jung (Jung, 1966) as evidence that alchemy was concerned with psychological or spiritual changes rather than chemical ones: the text states that at one point in the transformation, the operator “falls into the black sun” and experiences “a *palpable* absence of light” (an interesting psychological anticipation of black holes?). The darkness I experienced was somehow *radiant*, and I find myself wanting to use the paradoxical expression “deep but dazzling darkness” which the

mystical poet Henry Vaughan applied to God (Vaughan, 1958).

I am not trying to draw any particular theological or metaphysical conclusions when I use the word “God” here. On the contrary, my readings in theology and metaphysics in earlier years never conjured up to my mind anything remotely like my experience. I am simply saying that *since* the experience, Vaughan’s line and a whole host of other statements made by mystics in all religions seem to make sense as word-straining attempts to describe the extraordinary state in which I found myself—for instance, the Hebrew poet’s cry in Psalm 139 that “the night shineth as the day,” or Mohammed’s statement that he experienced “the Night of Power” (Bucke, 1923), or the assertion of St. John of the Cross that he encountered God as “a dark cloud illuminating the night” (John, 1958). I am even led to wonder if similar experiences rather than mere metaphysical speculation, underlay the references to “cosmic darkness” in some of the world’s primordial creation stories, such as the “darkness on the face of the deep” in *Genesis* or the “darkness at first by darkness hidden” in the *Rig Veda* (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 1945). Could the Hebrew creation story have been inspired by the experience of Abraham when he went into a deep sleep at sunset “and lo, a dread and a great darkness fell upon him” (*Genesis* 15:12)?

Most NDE literature emphasizes experiences of light rather than of darkness; if dark is mentioned at all, it is usually in connection with a dark tunnel or valley through which the person seems to hurtle towards a bright light or heavenly landscape beyond. One man interviewed by Raymond Moody, however, suggested something altogether more positive in the experience of darkness when he said it was “so deep and impenetrable that I could see absolutely nothing, but this was the most wonderful, worry-free experience you can imagine” (Moody, 1975). I too felt utterly *secure* in my darkness, knowing that all life’s struggles were over and I had “come home” to a state beyond all danger, where I no longer needed or wanted anything because everything I could possibly want or need was already mine. That shining darkness seemed to contain everything that ever was or could be, all space and all time, and yet it contained nothing at all, because the very word “thing” implies separate entities, whereas what I experienced was an utterly simple being-ness without any kind of separation—the very essence of aliveness prior to any individual living beings. Another paradoxical expression, this time from Eastern mysticism, seems the only one that is remotely adequate—“the living Void” of Taoism (Lao-Tzu, 1972), Hinduism (Griffith, 1982), Tibetan Buddhism (Blofeld, 1970), and Zen (Watts, 1957). In Christian mysticism this same idea is found in Meister

Eckhart's description of the Godhead as "empty, as though it were not" (Eckhart, 1981) and in Jacob Boehme's reference to God as "a suprasensual abyss" (Boehme, 1970).

I join hands here with another of Moody's NDE subjects (Moody, 1975) who reported "just floating and tumbling through space" and then added, "I was so taken up with this void that I just didn't think of anything else." The idea that a void could be interesting would have seemed like nonsense to me before, but it now makes total sense. In fact the state I am trying to describe seems to defy all ordinary canons of logic, and my deepest resonance is to Buddha's classic description of Nirvana (Pali Canon, 1968), which simply piles one paradox upon another:

Monks, there exists that condition wherein is neither earth nor water nor fire nor air; wherein is neither the sphere of infinite space nor of infinite consciousness nor of nothingness nor of neither-consciousness-nor-unconsciousness; where there is neither this world nor a world beyond nor both together nor moon-and-sun. Thence, monks, I declare there is no coming to birth; thither is no going; therein is no duration; thence is no falling; there is no arising. It is not something fixed, it moves not on. That indeed is the end of ill.

And even "the end of ill" has to be contradicted too if I am to do justice to my experience, for it was in no way merely negative. It was a "worry-free experience," "a very peaceful blackness," but there was nothing passive or lifeless about it—it was "the peace of God that passeth understanding." Words like "bliss" or "joy" are equally inadequate, for they are far too limited, which I think must be why one of the oldest religious documents known to mankind, the Katha Upanishad, says that when its young hero Nachiketa went to the kingdom of death, he discovered a new kind of self, the Universal Self, Brahman, who is "effulgent Being, joy beyond joy" (Hume, 1974).

I have no recollection whatever of any transition from ordinary consciousness to this nirvanic condition. I can't positively *deny* having any sensation of leaving my body or passing through a tunnel—I just don't remember anything at all after feeling drowsy on the bus. In the shining darkness there was no feeling of having *gone* anywhere—it was more like finding that everywhere had become present to me. Yet there *was* a sense of having ceased to be the ordinary me, which is my subjective reason for believing that my experience was, like Nachekita's, a trip into the kingdom of death rather than, say, some kind of hyping-up of the brain resulting from the drug. My *feeling* is, quite precisely, of having gone beyond death, though I don't mean of *surviving* death, because the Self which I

had become was so much more than my ordinary self that I had no recollection of, almost no interest in, my personal history. Yet at the same time it would be misleading to say that I *lost* my past or the people I have known in ordinary life; although there was nothing like the life-review which forms a prominent part of many NDEs, I still had a sense that my whole life as John Wren-Lewis was completely present, and could have been reviewed if I'd wanted, just as I could have met my deceased relatives or "angels, archangels and the whole company of heaven" if I'd been inclined. But in that shining dark, I simply felt no need for any separate experience.

Words and logic come under even greater strain when I attempt to describe how John Wren-Lewis with his personal history came back from the nirvanic state. The very phrase "came back" is wrong, for two reasons. First, as I said earlier, the nirvanic state didn't become just a memory; when I eventually "clicked back into it" by using the dream-recall exercise, I found it was still right there with me, even though not in quite the same way as when I was (from the doctor's point of view) unconscious. And secondly, it makes no sense in terms of ordinary logic to talk about coming or moving out of a state in which time had ceased to exist. This last is a problem with which all the great religious systems of the world have wrestled in their various doctrines of creation. If God is everything, how can anything else exist? and if God is eternal, "when" can time possibly "come" into being? I used to think these were abstract metaphysical issues and probably meaningless word-juggling; I feel sure now that those doctrines were attempts to express just the kind of impossible transition I went through from nirvana to the rebirth of John.

So I can only say that it seemed as if the impossible happened, and a movement took place in eternity which is beyond all movement. In the Jewish Kabbalah, it is said that the *en sof*, the Limitless, created (or creates, for this happens beyond time) a space within itself so that limited being can also exist (Schaya, 1973). In the Taittiriya Upanishad (Hume, 1974) it is said that Brahmin changed (or changes) from the pure Unmanifest to the Manifest (though of course there is nothing other than Brahmin for Brahmin to manifest to!). In the creation-story of the Maoris of New Zealand it is said that "in the beginning there was *Te Kore*, the Nothing . . . and into the void of nothingness and night came a gleam of light, a speck of light. Light unseen, for there was none to see" (Yearbury, 1976). To coin my own phrase, it was as if the personal "I" *budded out* from that eternity of shining dark, without my ceasing to *be* the shining dark—which I suppose is what Hindu theology is trying to express by the



statement that Atman, the individual self, is identical with Brahman, the universal Self.

And the *whole process* was blissful, which is another marked contrast between my experience and a great many NDEs. There was no sense of regret at coming back from the heavenly state or “place” into the narrow world of physical existence. Manifestation seemed to be just another mode, as it were, of the bliss of the Unmanifest, the Dark. I resonate to those wonderful words attributed to God in *The Book of Job*: “Where was thou when I laid the foundations of the earth . . . when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” I feel I know exactly why the Bible says that God looked upon the creation and saw that it was good. But before my experience, the idea of God creating the world always conjured up images of a kind of super-builder at work, whereas the “feel” of my experience was nothing like that. It was more like Aristotle’s idea of created things being *drawn* into existence by the sheer radiance of divine beauty; the bud that was me opened out, as it were, in response to that black sun which was also, in some utterly paradoxical sense, my-Self. I *was* alpha and omega, the beginning and the end of the creation-process. Could there have been an experience like this, I wonder, behind A. N. Whitehead’s strange theory that the universe exists in the response of the final nature of God to the primordial nature of God (Whitehead, 1969).

I have put all this in the past tense, a description of something that happened in Thailand, but that leaves out the most astonishing thing about it, namely that *it is all still here*, both the shining dark void and the experience of myself coming into being out of, yet somehow in response to, that radiant darkness. My whole consciousness of myself and everything else has changed in an almost tangible way; in the early days, I kept putting my hand to the back of my head to make sure the skull was still there, feeling for all the world as if the doctors had removed it and exposed my brain to the infinite darkness of space. It is no longer the sixty-year-old John who looks at the environment, but the shining dark void which is in some strange sense also “I”—and what I perceive with my eyes and other senses is a whole world, my body and mind included, that seems to be coming fresh-minted into existence *moment by moment*, each instant evoking the utter delight of “Behold, it is very good!” To resort yet again to paradox, I seem to be simultaneously at a vast distance from everything and yet inside everything. When I perceive, say, a chair or a tree, I seem to see it through the wrong end of a telescope, yet I also have the constant sense of *being* the chair or tree perceiving itself. I was quite taken aback, recently,

when I read the statement of Meister Eckhart that “The eye with which I see God is the eye with which God sees me” (Eckhart, 1981).

I must reiterate here my earlier observation that this is quite different from the expanded consciousness given by psychedelic drugs, though it is every bit as palpable. It is in no sense a “high”—on the contrary, its feeling-tone is one of gentle equanimity. In fact I think it is almost misleading to call it an *altered* state of consciousness, for my feeling, after living with it for nearly two years, is that in some strange way it is not really extraordinary at all. It is like having come home to something I have always known deep down, which I suppose must be what Plotinus meant when he said (Gould, 1963) that the Ultimate Oneness is not “other”—it is *we* in our so-called normal state of consciousness who are “other,” estranged from the true ordinariness of reality. And of course, the most striking difference between this consciousness and psychedelic experience is precisely that it *is* still with me, undiminished, after all this time, and shows no signs of fading (cf. Masters and Houston, 1967).

I hasten to add that I do not enjoy this consciousness all the time, though I wish I could—but there is no sense of “coming down” as with psychedelics. What happens is something I would have found utterly incredible had I heard of it second-hand. *I simply forget about this pearl of great price*, and drift off into all kinds of preoccupations, mostly trivial, thereby reverting to my old way of experiencing myself and the world. At first, in Thailand, I again and again caught myself thinking, “Oh, God, it’s gone”—but then, as soon as I focused on the fact that I was missing something from life, it all came flooding back, with no effort on my part at all, the shining dark void at the back of my head and behind everything else, and the experience of everything coming freshly into glorious new existence now! and now! and now! I think this must be what is meant by the mystical notion that so-called normal human life is really a state of chronic forgetfulness of “who we really are,” or by the statement of Plotinus (Gould, 1963) that the Supreme is always with us *but we do not always look at it*, or by the Christian doctrine that it is we who turn away from God, not God from us. I suppose my NDE must have somehow shocked me into recognizing the Supreme, so that my forgetfulness of “who I really am” is now spasmodic rather than chronic.

Needless to say, it took me some time—several weeks—to come to terms with all this, and only as time went by did I realize that, in keeping with its sense of being more ordinary than ordinary, the new consciousness neither brought nor demanded any drastic changes

of lifestyle or personality. I was still recognizably John Wren-Lewis, I did not lose my taste for meat or wine or humor, and I found no urge or need to spend long periods in meditation. I have for some years enjoyed half-hour spells of meditation without finding the process any big thing, and while I certainly enjoy meditation more with the new consciousness, this is no different from my increased delight in other experiences: I don't find that meditation, diet or any other kind of discipline has any effect either on the frequency with which I drift out of the mystical consciousness, nor on my ability to click back into it. I now understand what the modern mystic Da Free John means when he states in his autobiography, "There is only the ordinary" (Jones, 1972), an idea clarified in one of his tapes by the statement that after his final experience of God-realization, he went home with his wife and watched TV. As the old Chinese saying has it, before enlightenment, hew wood and draw water; after enlightenment, hew wood and draw water.

What the new consciousness *has* brought about is a subtle but radical change in attitude to life as a whole, which corresponds so closely with the traditional definitions of enlightenment that I use the word without apology. In the first place, I no longer have any fear of dying. This is a well-known result of NDEs, and often goes hand-in-hand, paradoxically, with greater enjoyment of living, but for me it would be quite false to attribute my change of attitude to a metaphysical conviction that "death is not the end," or that there is a "world beyond." My changed feeling about death is simply part and parcel of a much more general, all-embracing experience for which the most apt term is the Buddhist notion of non-attachment. It is the practical counterpart of the paradox I have mentioned already, that nirvanic consciousness is totally complete in itself and yet still takes delight in manifesting. I find I no longer have any urgent desire for good things in the way I used to have (I suppose Buddhists would call it "craving") because the shining dark is in itself all the happiness I could possibly want, yet that does not in the least diminish my enjoyment of good things when they come—in fact I enjoy them more than ever. And as the ultimate instance of this principle, I enjoy living without concern about dying, for the fulness of "eternal life" is *now!* and *now!*, not in whatever the future may hold, either in the body or (perhaps) in some new manifestation elsewhere. On the other side of this coin, I still get pleasure, indeed more pleasure than ever before, from "good" experiences like sunsets or bird-song or great art or pleasant people or delicious food, yet I can (sometimes at least) get as much pleasure from things which in my old state of consciousness I would have called nondescript, like the

Surat Thani hospital room, or even downright nasty, like a filthy wet day or a heavy cold. This last discovery, that I could possibly enjoy a cold—not merely wallow in the indulgence of a day in bed, but actually get a kick from the sensations in my nose and throat—was probably the biggest of the many surprises that this new consciousness has brought me. For although I knew from the first that my fear of death was a thing of the past, I had no such assurance about pain; in fact I speculated, right from the very first night, that the marked contrast between my joy in “coming back” and the feelings of regret reported in so many NDEs might be due to the fact that my close encounter with death came from a pain-killing drug, whereas most people have to return to very painful bodies. And over the next few weeks I found that headaches and travel sickness did indeed distract me from the new consciousness quite powerfully, so that I had to wait until they had passed for it to take possession of me again.

Then, just as I had resigned myself to the idea that my “enlightenment” must be of a very inferior kind, since it apparently gave me none of the immunity to suffering which is supposed to characterize the enlightened person in Eastern thought, I began to notice changes. The feeling of being “open to the Void” at the back of my head seemed to have spread, without my noticing it happening, down my spine to the middle of my back. And around the same time, I found that the tinatus (hissing in the ears) from which I’ve suffered for some years had changed from being an annoyance which I could at best forget at times, and at worst could drive me nearly crazy, to a positively delightful sound which I welcomed as an old friend whenever it forced itself on my attention. I also found myself actually enjoying tiredness and the many minor pains that beset a sixty-year-old body, a startling verification of Freud’s contention (Freud, 1977; Marcuse, 1955) that pleasure and pain are often a matter of how we perceive precisely the same sensation. Then came my first post-NDE cold, which proved a startling revelation of hitherto unsuspected potentiality for enjoyment, and around that time I found the feeling of openness had spread still further down my back, right into my buttocks—a kind of upside-down version of the Hindu kundalini which is supposed to flow up the spine (Krishna, 1971; Sanella, 1976.)

So although my entry into Nirvana hasn’t transformed me into Instant Saint or Hero—I still get annoyed when I think someone is trying to push me around, and I still keep aspirin in the house in case I get pain I *can’t* enjoy—it does seem to have plunged me into an adventure of consciousness wherein I have no idea what the next

surprise is going to be. It would be dizzy-making if it weren't so fascinating, and I often feel as if I have been literally born again into a new life, where I'm still very much an infant finding my way around. I find my old life now seems like a distant memory—not actually forgotten or blurred, but somehow cut off, so that recalling it requires the same kind of effort as remembering lines of a play I once knew by heart but haven't performed for years. This kind of feeling is apparently quite a common result of NDEs, according to a recent survey in *Vital Signs* (1984).

On the other hand, my new life often seems to be a fulfillment of the old in ways I'd never before dreamed of. In particular, this adventure of consciousness gives me a research project for such years as remain to me far more challenging and exciting than anything that ever came my way in my earlier career as a scientist; all my interest in dreams and altered states of consciousness since I left industry (Wren-Lewis, 1974) seems like just a preparation for the work I now have to do in exploring this new state, such as a study of its effect on my dream life (Wren-Lewis, 1985). I find myself sharing with both modern NDEers and mystics of all ages an immense sense of gratitude for this gift which life has bestowed on me, and this is perhaps the most important of all the paradoxes I have now come to understand—that the mystical sense of the utter goodness of the universe as it is in no way lessens the desire to contribute to the world. On the contrary, that desire is an integral part of the mystical consciousness, an overflowing of thanks for the sheer joy of being. In the words of William Blake (Blake, 1948), "Gratitude is heaven itself," and the other name for gratitude is love.

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# **Moody's Versus Siegel's Interpretation of the Near-Death Experience: An Evaluation Based on Recent Research**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Recent research provides a basis for evaluating Raymond Moody's (1975) versus Ronald Siegel's (1980) interpretations of the near-death experience (NDE). Whereas Moody had concluded that the NDE is ontologically valid, Siegel interpreted the NDE as a purely subjective hallucinatory phenomenon. The findings of two recent investigations (Ring, 1980; Sabom, 1982), both utilizing large samples and appropriate methodological and statistical controls, generally appear to be more consistent with Moody's than with Siegel's interpretation. Basic features of the NDE have been found not attributable to particular background or circumstantial influences; the NDE's likelihood and extensiveness are associated with degree of physical near-death; visual details of NDE recollections are substantiated by medical records and are more accurate than "recollections" roleplayed by non-NDE survivors; and the NDE is experienced as uniquely impactful and real.

In his widely noted 1980 essay, Ronald Siegel disputed Raymond Moody's (1975, 1977) interpretation of the near-death experience (NDE). Moody's interpretation was that the NDE may be ontologically valid, on the basis of which he suggested "that death is a separation of the mind from the body, and that mind does pass into other realms of existence at this point" (1975, p. 151). In other words, Moody inferred a veridicality to the NDE compatible with traditional notions of a soul and afterlife (although Moody specifically disclaimed that his work could "prove that there is life after death," (p. 5). In contrast, Siegel asserted that the phenomenon was not "objective" but rather "subjective,"<sup>1</sup> and specifically, the product of "dissociative hallucinatory activity of the brain" (p. 911), "triggered by a variety of stimuli that result in massive cortical disinhibition and autonomic arousal" (p. 924).

The purpose of this article is to evaluate Moody's versus Siegel's interpretations in the light of two major research studies (as well as a survey) of the NDE. Contemporaneous with and subsequent to Siegel's 1980 essay, two investigators published their extensive



research findings (cf. Gibbs, 1981). Moody had written: “I am fully aware that what I have done does not constitute a scientific study” (p. 181); both Kenneth Ring (1980) and Michael Sabom (1982) independently determined in the late 1970s after reading the Moody book to conduct follow-up research that *would* meet scientific standards. The general initial attitude of both Ring and Sabom was one of interest but also of frustration at the haphazard data collection and reporting in *Life After Life*; specifically, Ring was sympathetic (1980, p. 17), while Sabom was thoroughly skeptical (pp. 3, 7.) Both sought to establish an empirical basis for closure with respect to certain issues raised or suggested by the Moody work. Further pertinent findings were provided by George Gallup Jr.’s recent (1982) survey research on the NDE.

Preliminary questions pertained to how common and consistently uniform the NDE actually is: Moody had surmised that the phenomenon is fairly common and consistent, and Siegel did not challenge these assumptions despite the fact that further research investigation was clearly needed. Since Moody’s cases had accumulated largely through publicity from his ongoing work, he had no basis for providing even an approximate answer to the elementary question of how common such experiences are among near-death survivors. Accordingly, both Ring and Sabom avoided designation of the NDE as a criterion for data collection at the outset. The Ring team sought subjects strictly on the basis of having come close to death from “a serious illness, accident, or suicide attempt” (p. 27). The Sabom team contacted hospital patients “who had suffered a near-death crisis event” (p. 7), and in initially approaching the patient “would act as if only routine medical details were being sought” (p. 9). The Sabom team also collected additional cases referred by medical colleagues who had learned of their NDE interest, but these cases were analyzed separately from the main sample. The subjects in both studies included comparable numbers of males and females, and were mostly white adults (some blacks, some adolescents) of diverse occupational and religious backgrounds.

The general result: Somewhere between one-third and one-half of near-death survivors reported having had NDEs (49 out of 102 subjects in Ring’s study, 34 out of 78 prospective cases in Sabom’s study, 35 percent of Gallup’s “near death survivor” respondents for a projected estimate of 8 million Americans). Although the NDE apparently is not universal, it seems to be common enough to support Moody’s implicit claim that it is a widespread occurrence.

Another Moody claim simply accepted by Siegel was that the NDE is a reasonably coherent phenomenon, that its features are sufficiently

consistent across many cases to comprise a unitary construct. Ring used Moody's (1975) 15 elements "as a provisional basis for grasping the core experience" (p. 24), but concluded after studying his data that the NDE could be "meaningfully ordered" in terms of "five distinct stages" which, when "considered in sequence, form a coherent pattern . . . the experience of (apparent) death in its developmental form" (p. 39). The five stages were: (1) a sense of peace and well being; (2) detachment from one's physical body; (3) entering a dark region (sometimes described as a tunnel); (4) seeing a brilliant light; and (5) entering the light or another realm of existence. The "stages" were reported in decreasing frequency, ranging from 60 percent of the total sample for stage 1 to 10 percent for stage 5. Ring found all of Moody's elements, although several (e.g., hearing a noise departing the body) were quite infrequent. Overall, Ring concluded that the NDE does constitute a unitary phenomenon.

Sabom reached the same conclusion, describing the NDE as "an ineffable sense of timeless reality occurring apart from one's physical body and associated with a pleasant understanding of death" (p. 23). Sabom systematized Moody's 15 elements into ten, which he described as follows: (1) subjective sense of being dead; (2) feelings of calm or peace (but sometimes preceded by momentary feelings of sadness, loneliness, or fright); (3) sense of bodily separation; (4) observation and hearing of physical events; (5) passage into a dark region or void (sometimes described as a tunnel); (6) experiencing a replay of significant past life events; (7) perception of a brilliant source of light; (8) entering a region of scenic beauty; (9) encountering personages such as deceased relatives or spiritual figures; and (10) return to one's physical body. These elements were commonly found with the exception of element 6, the life review, which was recollected by only a few respondents.

Instead of organizing the elements into five "stages," Sabom organized them into two "components": "autosopic" (or self-visualizing, usually from above the physical body<sup>2</sup>), and "transcendental" (a "deeper realm of the NDE," entailing "descriptions of objects and events that 'transcend' or surpass all earthly limits"; pp. 37, 41). Whereas elements 1 through 3 and 10 were common to both components, element 4 defined the autosopic component and elements 5 through 9 (at least 1 of them) defined the transcendental component. One-third of Sabom's NDE cases entailed only the autosopic component, 48 percent entailed only transcendental elements, and 19 percent elements of both, such that "the transcendental portion of the experience followed the autosopic

portion in a continuous, unbroken sequence” (p. 52).

Although Siegel accepted—correctly, it turned out—Moody’s suggestions that the NDE is reasonably common and coherent, Siegel explicitly or implicitly doubted the tenability of at least four other Moody suggestions consistent with Moody’s conclusion that the NDE represents an authentic spiritual phenomenon: (1) that the NDE is not specific to any particular personal background or to circumstance of near-death; (2) that the NDE varies in depth or extensiveness as a function of seriousness of clinical death; (3) that the specific recollections reported actually took place during the near-death period; and (4) that NDE and aftereffects are distinct, especially that NDErs who have also experienced hallucinations specify the NDE only as “real.” Consistent with Siegel’s subjectivist interpretation of the NDE were his inferences that it entails idiosyncratic content and circumstantial influences, constitutes subjective memories and images, and has no *unique* effect on worldview or lifestyle. Each of these issues constitutes researchable questions, to which various findings by Ring and Sabom are pertinent.

### RELIABILITY OF THE NDE ACROSS DIVERSE BACKGROUND AND CIRCUMSTANTIAL VARIABLES

Moody expressed “amazement” at “the great similarity in the (NDE) reports, despite the fact that they come from people of highly varied religious, social, and educational backgrounds” (1975, p. 15) as well as the fact that “the circumstances surrounding” the incidents “varied widely” (p. 17). Indeed, “in quite a few instances, reports have come from persons who had no religious beliefs or training at all prior to their experiences, and their descriptions do not seem to differ in content from people who had quite strong religious beliefs” (1975, p. 141). On the other hand, Moody acknowledged that religious background and belief did shape the NDE “to some extent,” e.g., “though the description of the being of light is invariable, the identity ascribed to it varies, apparently as a function of the religious background of the individual” (p. 140).

Siegel—although he accepted the coherence of the NDE phenomenon—asserted a much greater extent of background and circumstantial influence on NDE content:

The specific content of complex hallucinatory imagery is determined largely by set (expectations and attitudes) and setting (physical and psychological

environment). For many dying and near-death experiences, sets (fear of approaching death, changes in body and mental functioning, etc.) and settings (hospital wards, accident scenes, etc.) can influence specific eschatological thoughts and images. (p. 926).

The research by Ring and Sabom suggests that, in general terms, Moody was closer to the mark on this issue. After conducting numerous statistical analyses, Ring concluded that the NDE “appears to be a remarkably *robust* phenomenon, cutting across a variety of situational, individual, and demographic factors” (1980, p. 137; cf. Gallup, 1982, pp. 31-56). NDEs were reported with comparable frequency and depth irrespective of mode of near-death onset (illness, accident, to some extent suicide attempt<sup>3</sup>), belief background (religious denomination, degree of religiousness), and other person variables (age, sex, race, social class, and marital status). Similarly, Sabom found no frequency differences “between groups broken down according to age, area of residence, size of home community, religious background or frequency of church attendance. Moreover, groups at the highest and lowest levels of educational attainment reported these elements with similar frequency” (p. 59). Sabom also found no significant differences by location of near-death episode (inside or outside a hospital) and type of crisis event (cardiac arrest, coma, or accident) (p. 202). Finally, Sabom pointed out that “a major portion of the interviewing was done at a time when *Life After Life* and related media were not general knowledge in the rural populations of northern Florida (where most of the subjects reside)” (p. 158). Sabom concluded “that the content of the NDE is quite consistent among near-death survivors from the American culture<sup>4</sup> with differing backgrounds” (p. 60).

Although the NDE in general terms does not seem to be provincial to particular persons or circumstances—and indeed, as noted earlier, seems to be reliably characterizable in terms of the basic “stages” or “components” described respectively by Ring and Sabom—the idiosyncracies of *specific* content may be greater than Moody acknowledged, and closer to Siegel’s emphasis. Siegel wrote: “Like hallucinations, visions of the afterlife are suspiciously similar to this world” (p. 924). An anomalous case noted by Sabom in a data appendix is consistent with Siegel’s suspicions of the familiar and the idiosyncratic. Sabom’s case #21, a white, blue-collar, protestant male aged 58, reported a transcendental-type NDE in which he apparently experienced a light (element 7) yet did not enter any region of scenic beauty (element 8) but instead reported an idiosyncratic version of element 9, encountering others: he sensed the “presence

of four unknown nurses” and encountered “verbal interrogation by nurses about possible ‘subversive activities’” (p. 210). Nor does such an experience sound particularly pleasant (element 2).<sup>5</sup> (Admittedly, the respondent might have suspected this part of his NDE to be hallucinatory; see “Status and Effects Uniquely Attributable to NDEs” section, below.) Although case 21 was apparently quite anomalous, even one NDE case entailing such major idiosyncracies in specific content suggests that Siegel’s assertion of the role of subjective expectancy (in the above case, paranoid anxieties?) cannot be altogether dismissed.

### ASSOCIATION OF THE NDE WITH CLINICAL DEATH

Although Siegel did not explicitly challenge Moody’s assumption that the NDE is associated with clinical death, his cortical-disinhibition explanation would not seem to be necessarily consistent with an assumption of neurophysiological depression or reduction during the experience. Indeed, Siegel considered NDEs, like any hallucination, to be “directly related to states of *excitation* and *arousal* of the central nervous system” (p. 925). Yet clinical death (unconsciousness as well as absence of reflexes, respiration, and pulse) could hardly be described as a state of “excitation and arousal of the central nervous system.” If Siegel’s hypothesis is correct, then one would doubt that the NDE could have occurred during actual clinical death, and certainly would anticipate a negative relationship between extensiveness or “depth” of the NDE and seriousness of the associated near-death crisis. Yet Ring found a significant *positive* correlation between ratings of the extensiveness of the NDE (1980, pp. 32-33) and ratings of closeness to physical death (1980, pp. 109-112). Similarly, Sabom found that NDEs were significantly more likely where the survivor’s duration of unconsciousness (estimated from medical records) had been greater than 30 minutes, or where the method of resuscitation was intensive, that is, included “all measures (i.e., intravenous glucose, electrolytes, antibodies, etc.) used in critical nonacute comatose situations” (p. 58).

A weaker form of a hallucination hypothesis could point out that none of either Ring’s or Sabom’s cases entailed documented brain death, and hence the NDE could still be dependent upon some minimal electro-chemical activity of the brain. Indeed, Mark Woodhouse (1983) specifically recommended inquiry into whether NDEs can occur during “flat EEG’s” as a critical approach to providing an empirically based evaluation of whether the NDE is an imaginal or veridical experience. Moody (1975, pp. 148-149)

disputed the value of this kind of evidence, however, pointing out the problematic character of EEG assessment. Of course, even assuming that NDEs were found to be dependent upon minimal brain activity, one would be left with having to explain why NDEs were elaborated in proportion to *reduced*, rather than enhanced, neurophysiological arousal.

Siegel could retain his original hypothesis by assuming that the NDEs did in fact occur during states of excitation and arousal—but *before* or *after* the near-death crisis—and then incorrectly attributed to the near-death period. One approach to assessing this question is especially intriguing. Moody noted that many of his cases reported relatively unique visual details specific to the near-death period while out of body, and asserted that these details were in some instances independently corroborated by doctors and other witnesses. If this were true, and if these details were of a kind unlikely to be told to the survivor subsequently by witnesses, then one would have fairly strong evidence that the NDEs did in fact occur during the period of clinical death. Indeed, one would then be constrained to conclude that the autoscopic activity “really” occurred.

## VERIFIABILITY OF NDE AUTOSCOPIC RECOLLECTIONS

Siegel's imaginal interpretation of NDE autoscopic remembrances entailed noting “the constructive aspect of hallucinations” and suggesting “a simple exercise”:

Recall the last time you went swimming in the ocean. Now ask yourself if this memory includes a picture of yourself running along the beach or moving about in the water. Such a picture is obviously fictitious, since you could not have been looking at yourself, but images in the memory often include fleeting pictures of this kind. (p. 924)

Sabom expressed his skepticism explicitly, claiming that Moody “did not attempt to substantiate these reports (of visual details) by medical records or other available sources”<sup>6</sup> and proposing to do just that:

Now, the majority of patients whom I would be interviewing had been resuscitated from a cardiac arrest. By this time in my career, I had personally directed and participated in well over a hundred such resuscitations. I knew what a resuscitation consisted of, that is, how it would look. I was anxiously awaiting the moment when a patient would claim that he had “seen” what had transpired in his room during his own resuscitation. Upon such an encounter, I intended to probe meticulously for details that would not ordinarily be known to nonmedical personnel. In essence, I would pit my

experience as a trained cardiologist against the professed visual recollections of lay individuals. In so doing, I was convinced that obvious inconsistencies would appear which would reduce these purported visual observations to no more than an “educated guess” on the part of the patient. (p. 7)

Moreover,

Twenty-five “control” patients were interviewed whose backgrounds were similar to those reporting autoscopic NDEs and who had been consecutively admitted to a coronary care unit (CCU) . . . While in the CCU, each of these patients had had the opportunity to observe closely at his bedside a cardiac monitor to which he was attached, a cardiac defibrillator, and intravenous needles and equipment. Moreover, each patient had admitted to regular viewing of a home television set prior to this admission. Thus this group of twenty-five cardiac patients had received considerable exposure to hospital routine and television programs, both of which could have contributed to their knowledge of CPR.

During the interview, each patient was asked to imagine that he was standing in the corner of a hospital room watching a medical team revive a person whose heart had stopped beating. He was then asked to describe in visual detail what he would expect to see in such a situation. He was cautioned to describe only those details that he was reasonably confident would actually be seen during CPR on a hospitalized patient. Each of these interviews was tape-recorded and later analyzed.

Twenty-three of the twenty-five interviewed patients made some attempt to describe the CPR procedure based on their own general knowledge of hospital equipment and protocol. Without undue prompting, twenty of these twenty-three respondents made a major error in their descriptive accounts. (pp. 84-85)

In contrast, the 32 surgery-related prospective NDE cases in Sabom’s study provided autoscopic descriptions that “did correspond in at least a general way to the known facts of the near-death crisis event,” and 6 of these 32 survivors “were able to record specific details of their near-death crisis event” (p. 87). These were the cases for which Sabom had been skeptically and “anxiously awaiting.” The result: Their recollections were in fact verified in fine-grained detail from medical records and Sabom’s own technical knowledge. Further, the recollected details in each case were “fairly specific for the actual resuscitation being described and . . . not interchangeable with the clinical circumstances of other near-death crisis events” (p. 114). One NDE survivor did make apparent errors in his description of the working of a defibrillating meter—until Sabom discovered that the recollection described precisely the working of an older model that was still “in common use in 1973, at the time of his [the subject’s] cardiac arrest” (p. 104). Sabom considered several possible explanations for the accuracy of the recollections, including the possibility “that the accuracy of the NDE

could be attributed to information passed on to the near-death survivor by someone (a doctor, a nurse, etc.) who witnessed the resuscitation”:

I find this possibility unlikely for two reasons. First, the type of information contained in the autoscopic descriptions is not what would likely be explained to a patient recovering from a cardiac arrest. It is usually appropriate to explain to resuscitated patients that their “heart stopped beating” and that an “electrical shock” was used on the chest to stabilize cardiac rhythm, but there is no conceivable reason to supply the details reported in the typical autoscopic NDE—the insertion of a plastic airway, the checking for a carotid pulse or pupillary response in the eye, the drawing of arterial blood from the hand or the groin, the movement of the needles on the face of the defibrillator, etc. Second, several patients claimed that they reported the autoscopic experience soon after the resuscitation. Interviews with family members confirmed these claims. Moreover, these family members had observed that the original description of the NDE was consistent with subsequent retellings of the experience by their resuscitated relative. (p. 114)<sup>7</sup>

#### STATUS AND EFFECTS UNIQUELY ATTRIBUTABLE TO NDEs

According to Moody, NDErs report the NDE to be quite real (in contrast to dreams or hallucinations), to have inspired them to love others in a deeply empathic way, and to have convinced them that there is life after death. One survivor is quoted as saying: “It was real . . . My mind wasn’t at that point where I wanted to make things happen or make up anything. I just wasn’t in the state of mind” (1975, p. 84). Another stated: “It was nothing like a hallucination. I have had hallucinations once, when I was given codeine in the hospital. But that had happened long before the accident which really killed me. And this experience was nothing like the hallucinations, nothing like them at all” (pp. 84-85). Many respondents found their lives “broadened and deepened” (p. 89) by this quite real experience. As one survivor stated:

I try to do things that have more meaning and that make my mind and soul feel better. And I try not to be biased, and not to judge people. I want to do things because they are good, not because they are good to me. And it seems that the understanding I have to things now is so much better. I feel like this is because of what happened to me, because of the places I went and the things I saw in this experience. (p. 90)

Finally, according to Moody, “death is no longer frightening,” because “after his experience a person no longer entertains any doubts about his survival of bodily death. It is no longer merely an



abstract possibility to him, but a fact of his experience” (p. 96).

Siegel, while accepting Moody’s descriptions of aftereffects, did not regard such aftereffects as unique to the NDE. Siegel noted that hallucinations can seem quite real and vivid, and can engender “a feeling of insight” as well as “changed attitudes and beliefs that pass into an afterglow and remain as a vivid memory” (p. 924). However, Siegel would presumably doubt that claim that experiencers of both hallucinations and an NDE would consistently distinguish the latter as uniquely real and impactful.

We can ask these questions: Was Moody correct that the NDE is typically recollected as real (distinguishable from dreams or hallucinations) and impactful? Is there replication that those NDE survivors who have also experienced hallucinations regard the experience as distinguishable? Are the supposed effects on subsequent life specifically attributable to the NDE, or are they inspired by *any* near-death crisis event, NDE or otherwise? Findings by Ring and Sabom speak to these issues.

The recent research does substantiate that respondents do perceive the NDE as reality. In the Ring sample, 19 out of 22 respondents asked whether the experience was like a dream stated emphatically that it was not (2 were unsure, and 1 stated that it was like a dream): e.g., “It was too real. Dreams are always fictitious. *This* was *me*, happening at *that* time and there was no doubt that it was reality” (1980, p. 82; cf. Gallup, 1982, pp. 39-41). Regarding the respondents’ evaluation relative to hallucinations, Ring’s result generally supported Moody:

I did find some evidence for the occurrence of hallucinatory-like images among a small number of our respondents—there were perhaps a half dozen such cases—including both core experiencers and nonexperiencers. In every case, however, the hallucinatory images were completely *idiosyncratic* and were regarded afterward by the respondents as having been hallucinations, that is, not real. In the few instances where a core experiencer also reported having had hallucinations, these could be *distinguished* from the core experience itself as having had a distinctly different quality. Perhaps the most definitive comment was delivered by one of our core experiencers, who was herself a psychiatrist and who, accordingly, should know something both about dreams and hallucinations. She told me, without qualification, that, in her judgment, her own experience was neither the one nor the other. (p. 83)

Sabom’s results also corroborated Moody’s assertions on this point. Indeed, one respondent regarded his NDE as “realer than here, really. After that the world seemed like a mockery to real life” (p. 16). Another respondent reported:

I was in a coma for seven or eight days and I had all those other convulsions. I had hallucinations then but they weren't the same. They were real—that is, they weren't like a dream, yet they weren't the same as I felt in that ambulance, in that in the hallucinations I'd be more like a spectator but in this experience [the NDE] where I lifted out of my body, it was *me!* (p. 169)

Moody also stated (and Siegel did not doubt) that the NDEs had had considerable impact on the survivors in many instances. This assertion is supported by the recent research, but only in certain respects when the effects are compared to those reported by non-NDE near-death survivors. Ring, using retrospective questionnaire data, reported that 37 percent of the NDE respondents attributed to the experience an increased appreciation of life; 24 percent, a "renewed sense of purpose"; and 24 percent felt "more loving, caring."<sup>8</sup> The corresponding percentages for the nonexperiencers were 29, 20, and 12, but these differences favoring the NDE survivors were not significant. Nor were other suggestive percentage differences: "stronger person," 20 percent vs. 8 percent; "more patient, understanding," 10 percent vs. 0; "want to help others," 8 percent vs. 0. Ring did note his "personal" and qualitative" impression, however, that

experiencers are more likely to show a heightened sense of what I can only vaguely call "spiritual awareness" and this quality seems to pervade the other changes that they report. They also seem, more often, to radiate a certain serenity or peace or acceptance of life. (1980, p. 140)

Statistically significant differences were found in reorientation of views on religion and death. NDE survivors recollected significantly more change than non-NDE survivors on "religious feeling" (p. 159), as well as on a "global religiousness" scale (attributable mainly to a "belief in life after death component, but enhanced by a "belief in God" component). Also, there was a dramatic retrospective decline in "fear of death" for experiencers relative to nonexperiencers. Finally, asked to say "what death meant to them," 37 percent of the experiencers (vs. 5 percent of the nonexperiencers) mentioned "peace, beauty, or bliss," and 24 percent of the experiencers (vs. 4 percent of the nonexperiencers) mentioned reincarnation as at least a possibility.

Sabom's results were similar. He reported, for the experiencers relative to nonexperiencers in his sample, highly significant declines in fear of death (in terms of both questionnaire and interview data) and highly significant increases in belief in afterlife (pp. 212-213). Also, Sabom noted:

In my medical involvement in the lives of many of these patients, I could often detect a change in the attitudes and beliefs of those who had told me of their NDE. A deepening of religious beliefs, a changing of vocational interest (e.g., becoming a hospital volunteer) and a focus on more humanitarian concerns were common developments. Moreover, a patient's outlook on life was often transformed in such a way as to allow him to cope more successfully with the day-to-day trials of a medical illness . . . Each person would invariably attribute the change in some way to the NDE. (p. 157; cf. Gallup, 1982, pp. 128-134)

In summary, the NDE is evidently experienced as reality and does generate certain changes in worldview and lifestyle, even when compared to effects attributable to a close brush with death (some differences are not significant, however). Such a confirmation merely supports Siegel's acceptance of Moody's claims to this effect, however, and may not be discriminative of an imaginal (hallucinatory) vs. veridical (spiritually authentic) interpretation. On the other hand, somewhat discouraging of the hallucination hypothesis are the cases cited by both Moody and the subsequent researchers wherein experiencers of both hallucinations and NDEs emphatically distinguished the latter and accorded it reality status.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the recent research tends to support Moody's original inferences and even his conclusion from this phenomenon that "death is a separation of the mind from the body, and that mind does pass into other realms at this point" (1975, p. 151). Moody is supported that the NDE is fairly common and coherent, that it is in fact a relatively robust phenomenon cutting across various background and circumstantial factors, that its likelihood<sup>9</sup> and extensiveness are associated with degree of physical near-death, that reported visual and auditory recollections can be independently corroborated, and that it is for the survivor a quite real and uniquely impactful experience (at least in certain respects). Ring's and Sabom's own conclusions concur with Moody's. Ring: "Consciousness (with or without a second body) may function independently of the physical body" (1980, p. 233). Sabom pondered an affirmative answer to the question: "Is out-of-body perception indeed occurring during the NDE, and if so, is some element of the human organism (the *mind*?) separating from the physical determinants of consciousness (the *brain*?) to accomplish such a feat?" (p. 181).

Certainly, Siegel's hallucination hypothesis encounters some turbulence in light of recent research. Sabom, too, had "suspected that the experience would largely reflect personal dreams and

fantasies'' but was forced to reconsider upon finding ''basic patterns'' (p. 158) as well as ''verification'' (p. 159) of the autoscopic observations. Further, the recent research consistently supports Moody's assertion that survivors who have also experienced hallucinations emphatically claim the distinguishability of the NDE. Finally, Siegel's process hypothesis of neural excitation and arousal runs into particular difficulty against findings that the likelihood and extensiveness of the NDE are associated with the pronounced neurophysiologically *depressive* characteristics of clinical death.

A hypothesis that an imaginal elaboration in some sense is involved in the NDE may not be totally discountable, however. Sabom acknowledges that the NDE ''can be entered into and modified in certain individual ways'' (p. 16). Indeed, in at least one instance, the ''presences'' encountered by an NDEr were quite *this-worldly* and possibly delusional products (''four nurses'' engaging in a ''verbal interrogation'' about the experiencer's ''possible 'subversive activities''). Also, Ring acknowledged ''that *what* is seen is, at least at first, largely determined by preexisting schemata of near-death survivors'' (1980, p. 248).

It is also clear, however, that a subjectivist interpretation cannot provide a total explanation. I state this chiefly because of the rather astonishing controlled evidence found by Sabom for the verifiability of the NDE autoscopic component. The experiential validity of the autoscopic component then bids that we take the transcendental component seriously. As Sabom pointed out: ''In the combined NDE, the transcendent portion occurs in sequence following the autoscopic elements and is perceived by the person as being equally vivid and real as its autoscopic forerunner'' (p. 185). Sabom's speculation: ''Since I suspect that the NDE is a reflection of a mind-brain split, I cannot help but wonder why such an event should occur at the point of near-death. Could the mind which splits apart from the physical brain be, in essence, the 'soul,' which continues to exist after final bodily death, according to some religious doctrines?'' (p. 185). That is where we, at this point in the research, must leave the matter: there is indeed evidence of spiritually suggestive life at the point of bodily death.

## NOTES

1. Siegel did not rule out the *possibility*, however, that the ''objective'' interpretation could be correct: ''Finding parallels with satisfactory explanations of [one's] own is not the same as finding proof against [spiritual] survival'' (p. 927).

2. As Ring (personal communication, June 2, 1984) has pointed out, Sabom's use of the term "autoscopic" should not be confused with the standard meaning of autoscopic *projection*, referring to the "observation" of one's body image from the standpoint of one's physical body.
3. In a later study of 32 suicide survivors, Ring and Stephen Franklin (1982) noted a minor but interesting qualitative variation that "has occurred, to the best of our knowledge, only three times in all our NDE cases but each time in a suicide survivor," namely, "drifting through a grayness rather than a blackness or darkness." In *Life at Death* (1980), Ring also quoted one suicide survivor's recollection "describing a portion of a conversation (in thought) he had, while unconscious, with what he took to be God.

... then He said, "Do you want to go back?" And He goes, "Finish your life on earth." And I go, "No, I want to die." And He goes, "You are breaking my laws to commit suicide. You'll not be with me in heaven if you die." And I say, "What will happen?" And then after this I started coming to. So I don't know what happened after this. So I think that God was trying to tell me that if I commit suicide I'm going to go to hell, you know? So, I'm not going to think about suicide anymore (laughs nervously). (p. 127)

Similarly, according to Moody (1975), his "few cases" of suicide survival stated that "in their disembodied state they were unable to do anything about their problems, and they also had to view the unfortunate consequences which resulted from their acts" (p. 143).

4. Unfortunately, there is at present no cross-cultural research on the NDE (although there are some suggestive similar results from a comparative [Indian and American] study of death-bed visions; Osis and Haraldsson, 1977). Moody noted some quite remarkable parallels to the NDE in the ancient *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, as well as in the near-death recollections of a seventeenth-century Swedish scientist-turned-visionary, Emanuel Swedenborg.
5. Maurice Rawlings (1978), a cardiologist, has reported learning among his dying and resuscitated patients of numerous "bad" (hellish or nightmarish) "NDEs" (cf. Gallup, 1982, pp. 73-87). Rawlings also noted, however, that the content of the hellish cases "seems to vary considerably . . . from case to case," unlike the similarity across his "good" cases (p. 90). This observation raises a question as to whether the "hellish" reports

should be considered to be intrinsic to the NDE phenomenon (cf. Ring, 1980, pp. 193-195, 248-250).

6. This statement is accurate only if one assumes misrepresentation by Moody, who claimed that he did investigate medical records in some cases, and "the records have borne out the assertions of the persons involved . . . that when medical records have not been usable, I have secured the testimony of others—friends, doctors, or relatives of the informant—to the effect that the near-death event did occur" (p. 146).
7. Other naturalistic explanations considered and rejected by Sabom (1982) included: semiconscious auditory perception, conscious or unconscious fabrication, depersonalization, autoscopic hallucination, dreams, fulfillment of expectation, drug-induced delusion, endorphin release, temporal lobe seizure, hypoxia, and hypercarbia (pp. 151-178).
8. In a more recent study restricted to aftereffects in survival of *deep* NDEs, Ring (1984) concluded that these persons are especially "likely to show greater appreciation for life and more concern and love for their fellow humans while their interest in personal status and material possessions wanes" (p. 141).
9. The determinants of individual differences in the likelihood of having an NDE upon near death are largely a matter of speculation at this point. It is known that the NDE's likelihood and extensiveness are associated with a relatively serious near-death episode (see text). Yet among those who have come close to death on numerous occasions, some have had NDEs consistently, others only once or twice, still others not at all (Sabom, 1982). Perhaps experiences for these latter persons come only at the most "serious" point in the continuum, actual bodily death.

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## LETTERS

### Grosso's Review of Ring's *Heading Toward Omega*

To the Editor:

I wish to thank Michael Grosso for his excellent review of Kenneth Ring's book *Heading Toward Omega* (Grosso, 1985). Grosso's additional comments referring to "the new literature of hope" and "what might be called the evolutionary imperative" address a theme that has been close to my heart since my near-death experience.

As one of the subjects in Ring's book, I would like to elaborate on a few issues. In noting that the interview excerpts in *Heading Toward Omega* leave Ring open to charges that his findings are due to an experimenter effect, Grosso cited the following interchange between Ring and myself as an example that "could be construed as a perfect illustration of experimenter effect" (1985, p. 51):

. . . the interviewer (presumably Ring) says: "And you really did experience the real you in this state, it seems." And the interviewee responds: "Yeah, I knew at that point that I had met myself."

It might appear from that excerpt from *Heading Toward Omega* (Ring, 1984, p. 107) that Ring was putting words into my mouth; that is a danger in any interview. In my case, however, that was not true. That interview, done over two days, contained four and a half hours of tape. I had come to Connecticut to meet Ring with those ideas expressed throughout his book very set in my mind. During the taping, which followed four days of talks, Ring may have moved me along from topic to topic, but the ideas expressed were all originally my own.

Now that I am also working as a near-death researcher at the University of Connecticut, I realize that those ideas I once thought so personally mine might be expressed by anyone who has had a core experience, triggered either near death or in any other way. I also realize how strong minded "core experiencers" are as a group. Far from our opinions in Ring's book being a result of an experimenter effect, they have come from us, and even feel as though they have come through us from a higher source.



Grosso's and Ring's "literature of hope" validates our connection to the divine in our own higher selves. Personally, we struggle to maintain a balance between our earthbound humanness and our desire to again achieve that lofty experience of transcendence. In Grosso's paraphrasing of Pico della Mirandola's observation, "the peculiar glory of being human is to be *permanently* suspended between beasthood and godhood" (Grosso, 1985, p. 61). Life after near-death seems to be a bouncing back and forth along that continuum. John Wren-Lewis has eloquently described his new level of consciousness that has continued since his own near-death experience (Wren-Lewis, 1985). Other near-death experiencers have expressed their ability to remain "awake" for longer and longer periods of time, or, as they have said, not in time, but in the "eternal now."

Ring, Grosso, and Wren-Lewis have given us hope for that continued psychospiritual consciousness. That level can only be achieved by the work we do on our inner selves, while at the same time practicing what we have learned by helping others. My hope for all of us as we travel that continuum together is that we do that work on ourselves to release our own negativity, leaving us with the positive energy and clarity to help mankind head toward omega.

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#### **Sabom's Study Should Be Repeated**

To the Editor:

In letters published recently in *Anabiosis* (1984), Emily Cook and Susan Blackmore commented upon Michael Sabom's results (1982)

supporting the validity of perceptions reported by cardiac patients who had out-of-body experiences during near-death experiences. (I should note that this was not the main focus of either letter.) Although Blackmore was more critical than Cook, both writers felt that Sabom's evidence was impressive but not conclusive, and that the issue could not be resolved by further research. I am writing because I think forceful restatement and expansion of the latter point is called for.

Basically, I feel that the importance of the issue deserves more emphasis than it generally receives. In ordinary seeing, a physical image is formed at the retina of each eye. This is followed by a very complex sequence of events, corresponding to a similar complexity of structure, within the retina and certain areas of the brain, before a picture emerges in consciousness. While many details of the process are poorly understood, the assertion that the last event is dependent upon the preceding ones is strongly supported by everyday experience and much other evidence. But it is sharply contradicted if physically valid perceptions from a viewpoint outside the body occur during OBEs. Thus if the latter can be verified, some well-established ideas about physics, physiology, and the relationship of consciousness to the brain must be severely modified. Scientific prudence suggests that findings with such revolutionary implications must be replicated, perhaps several times, before they can command general acceptance. The truth of this statement is independent of any specific questions that may be raised about Sabom's results. (Somewhat similar remarks could be made about extra-sensory-perception [ESP] research, of which this is a special case, in general. There is a great deal of evidence for ESP, but none of it is unchallenged. The reasons for this could be discussed at length, but I suspect that a dearth of independently replicated results is prominent among them.)

Fortunately, repeating Sabom's procedures should pose no major problems for any investigator with adequate access to hospital patients and records. A key factor is the abundance of NDEs among resuscitated patients, which should make it easy to gather sufficient data. The investigator's attitude should make no difference, provided it is not so negative that patients won't recount their experiences. A recurrent bugaboo in ESP research—the possibility of deliberate cheating by subjects—can surely be excluded here. On the other hand, concerns like Blackmore's about auditory cues, insufficiently detailed accounts, and so forth, should receive attention in any repetition of Sabom's study. (I offer one far-fetched suggestion to stimulate thinking. Place a purely visual cue in a resuscitation room so that it would be visible only from above, change it each day, and watch

for mention of it in reports of NDEs.)

Sabom's study could be repeated, but should it be? I will explain why I feel strongly that it would be well worth the effort.

(1) As noted above, Sabom's results challenge some basic scientific ideas. No one suggests that his work was too sloppy to be taken seriously. On the contrary, it was an imaginative, successful effort to check patients' reports of OBEs against independent sources of information, and the results were in line with many less formal accounts of correspondences between OBEs and reality.

(2) A verified instance of ESP would put all ESP research in a new light.

(3) According to some theories, NDEs are essentially hallucinations associated with physiological changes in the brain of a person who is near death. Such a purely internal origin for NDEs would preclude valid perceptions during OBEs. Thus confirmation of Sabom's results would rule out this class of theories and favor ones in which the mind is not firmly tied to the body.

In summary, I am saying that Sabom's results, if true, have such profound implications in a variety of areas that it is imperative that they should be amply confirmed. The most straightforward way of doing this is to repeat his procedures (with modifications to meet criticism); this should be entirely feasible.

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#### Author's Postscript:

Reference should be made to a pair of letters, by V. Krishnan and Susan Blackmore, that appeared in *Anabiosis* (1985) after the foregoing letter was written. Those letters, which focus on Sabom's results, further illustrate the point that his evidence is much too strong to ignore but insufficient to establish revolutionary conclusions standing by itself. Thus they strengthen the case made above for an independent repetition of Sabom's work.

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**Editor's Postscript:**

In regard to Dr. Kincaid's proposal to replicate Sabom's work, the Annual Report of the Parapsychology Foundation for the Year 1985 noted under "The Grant Program" that Dr. Keith Hearne, of Hull, England, is designing experiments to study psychic phenomena occurring during near-death experiences.



## Five-Year Index

Following is the comprehensive index for Volumes 1-5 of *Anabiosis* and covers all material from July 1981 to Fall 1985. The complete citation for each article in the author index is listed under the name of the first author. Coauthors are listed alphabetically with a cross-reference to the first author. Book reviews appear in the author index under the name of the reviewer and in the subject index under the heading Books Reviewed, where they are arranged alphabetically by the surname of the book's first author or editor. Each entry in the subject index is identified by the surname of the first author only. Letters to the Editor are identified by the following designation immediately following the title: (letter).

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