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An Anthropological Perspective on Near-Death-Like Experiences in Three Men's Pregnancy-Related Spiritual Crises
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Editor’s Foreword

We start this issue of the Journal with a review by Canadian religious scholar Brian Bain of divine light and ecstasy as described in near-death experiences (NDEs) and in religious mystical experiences. There are, of course, other religious experiences besides mystical ones, some of them downright terrifying and others visionary without any relation to the mystical vision. Among religious experiences, mystical encounters are remarkable in part because the language used to describe them is so similar from tradition to tradition. Near-death experiences are largely consistent with mystical accounts, which speaks toward the continuity of the phenomena. Bain suggests that if we can broaden near-death research to include more fully the religious mystical experience, we may deepen our understanding of both fields; and that if we keep both fields focused on the experience itself, we might come up with new and better interpretations of it.

Bain argues further that recognizing a common human spirituality may have great personal and social value. For the individual, this might be the sense of spiritual meaning that so many find lacking in a materialistic society. For society, it might mean removal of the veil of bigotry that has characterized too many religious movements for far too long. Society might grow, he suggests, to appreciate our common spiritual heritage as we share our experiences, while being able to respect the various ways that we interpret them.

In another cross-disciplinary review, New Zealand transpersonal anthropologist Gregg Lahood explores NDE-like experiences among fathers associated with the births of their children. This interview study, based on Lahood’s doctoral dissertation, examines parallels between NDEs and “spiritual emergencies” of men during their partners’ pregnancies and of symbolic experiences of shaman midwives, and interprets these parallels in terms of Stanislav Grof’s perinatal matrices.

We also include in this issue two book reviews. Pastoral counselor Nancy Evans Bush reviews religious scholar Gracia Fay Ellwood's *The Uttermost Deep*, a thorough and profound analysis of near-death experiences in the light of world religious and philosophical traditions and parapsychological literature. Ellwood focuses particular attention
on "painful" NDEs, summarizing the diverse studies of these neglected experiences, and on the implication of NDEs for survival of death, melding both the theological and philosophical arguments and the empirical evidence into a balanced and coherent analysis.

Finally, Brazilian psychiatrist and psychologist Alexander Moreira-Almeida reviews psychologist and thanatologist David Lester's *Is There Life After Death?*, a skeptical but respectful review of the evidence bearing on the question of whether the personality survives after death. Lester devotes a third of this book to near-death experiences, and raises crucial questions about our assumptions and study of the mind-brain relationship.

Bruce Greyson, M.D.
ABSTRACT: Throughout history and across cultures, certain aspects of religious mysticism bear striking resemblance to modern near-death experiences (NDEs). Interpretations of these experiences vary widely, but the descriptions of the experiences themselves can be very similar, and are very difficult to discount as mere coincidence. While modern science has attempted to understand NDEs in various ways, it has yet to delve deeply into its role as part of a continuum of human experience. NDEs can be viewed as the latest stage in a long history of a phenomenon that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries. By focusing on where such profound human experience shares common ground, we will be able to see humanity itself at perhaps its most sublime level.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience; mystical experience; religious studies; comparative religion.

The human encounter with divine light and the ecstasy surrounding that encounter have been well documented. The major religions of the world have all recorded numerous accounts of this phenomenon. In the Western world today we find the same experience being reported by people who have undergone near-death experiences (NDEs). This...
provides us with a new foundation for approaching the subject of human spirituality: we find an experience that is common to people who are from entirely different cultures, and can be found throughout history.

It is almost regrettable that the word mysticism has been chosen to apply to the form of spiritual expression that I am about to describe. It evokes—as the root of the word suggests—something mysterious, even weird. In fact I am talking simply about an experience, an awesome experience to be sure, but one that has often been felt by perfectly normal, ordinary, rational people.

Classically, mysticism has been used to describe a direct experience, or even union, with God. God does not mean the same thing to everyone in every culture, however. He may be a she; personal or impersonal; outside of us or inside of us; or the whole concept can get so abstract that the word God cannot apply at all. While there is no single term to accommodate all definitions, I will use the term Divine here as being preferable to contrived jargon or no terminology at all.

While the mystical experience often takes on different forms, it is generally regarded as an area of commonality in the field of comparative religion. The mysticism that I am about to examine here makes this abundantly clear. We frequently see instances of communion, or even complete unity with the Divine. Most significantly, the language used to describe the mystical experience of light and ecstasy across religious traditions is almost exactly the same as that used to report the same encounter in near-death experiences.

The 20th century has witnessed a proliferation of accounts of experiences with a super brilliant “living light,” usually associated with feelings of ecstatic joy. At the beginning of the 20th century, Richard Maurice Bucke (1901) published an intriguing work entitled Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind. Bucke argued that experiences of “Illumination,” far from being a symptom of mental instability, were in fact a feature of highly evolved human minds. Bucke himself had had such an experience:

All at once, without warning of any kind, [Bucke] found himself wrapped around, as it were, by a flame-colored cloud. For an instant he thought of fire—some sudden conflagration in the great city. The next (instant) he knew that the light was within himself. Directly after there came upon him a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness, accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination almost impossible to describe. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning-flash of the Brahmic Splendor which has ever since lightened his life. Upon his heart fell one drop of the Brahmic Bliss, leaving thenceforward for always an aftertaste of
Bucke went on to interview 50 or so others that he had run across who had had similar experiences. One was the case of "C.M.C.,” who had this to say about her experience:

It was the gladness and rapture of love, so intensified that it became an ocean of living, palpitating light, the brightness of which outshone the brightness of the sun. Its glow, warmth and tenderness filling the universe. (Bucke, 1901, p. 328)

The experience of “C.M.C.” was typical of those whom Bucke had interviewed. He went on to surmise that this is a feature of a late stage of human evolution. This latter claim might be doubtful; one look at the ancient texts described in the pages to follow show that such experiences were reported often in the past. However, the breadth and clarity of people’s profound spiritual experiences in the 20th century, both within and outside of traditional religious bounds, set off Bucke’s work as a pioneering effort.

Shortly after Bucke’s work, William James published his now classic Varieties of Religious Experience (1902). In this work, James acknowledged the pioneering effort of Bucke. He went on to describe the many and various kinds of religious experience. James confirmed the modern day persistence of the type of encounter that Bucke had focused on. As an example, James drew upon the autobiography of a man called “J. Trevor”:

... suddenly, without warning, I felt that I was in Heaven – an inward state of peace and joy and assurance indescribably intense, accompanied with a sense of being bathed in a warm glow of light...

... When [experiences such as this] came, I was living the fullest, strongest, sanest, deepest life... I was aware that I was immersed in the infinite ocean of God. (James, 1902, pp. 388–389)

Remarkably similar to these accounts, but in ever-increasing numbers in recent years, are those found in near-death experiences. In 1975, Raymond Moody published his ground-breaking account of these occurrences in Life After Life. In this work, Moody accumulated some 150 interviews of people who had been pronounced clinically dead, but had been resuscitated and lived to tell what happened to them on “the other side.” While the accounts do vary somewhat, the similarities are most remarkable. Typical is the experience of a patient who was hospitalized for a severe kidney condition, and had lapsed into coma:

During this period when I was unconscious, I felt as though I were lifted right up, just as though I didn’t have a physical body at all.
A brilliant white light appeared to me. The light was so bright that I could not see through it, but going into its presence was so calming and so wonderful. There is just no experience on earth like it. (Moody, 1975, p. 75)

A proliferation of personal accounts of this kind of experience, as well as scientific studies of the phenomenon, followed Moody's book. Among the more noteworthy in the latter category include Kenneth Ring's *Life at Death: A Scientific Investigation of the Near-Death Experience* (1980). After having interviewed more than 100 people who had had the experience under investigation, Ring was able to confirm most of Moody's findings, and was able to eliminate such considerations as religious background as a determining factor in what people experienced. In fact, Ring concluded, reports of near-death experiences remain remarkably similar regardless of the person's upbringing.

A decade later came Melvin Morse's *Closer to the Light* (Morse and Perry, 1990). Morse examined some near-death experiences of children in order to see if there were any significant differences between these reports and their adult counterparts. Children were good subjects because they had not had time to absorb many adult conceptions about death. Typical of these is the story of "Bill," who at the age of nine had accidentally inhaled gasoline, and was suffocating:

All of a sudden I couldn't move. I found myself floating into a dark tunnel. I saw light and the closer I floated to it, the more I liked it. When I got to the portal opening to the Light and was just ready to step through, I felt a combination of relief, joy, and pleasure. I just wanted to be inside the Light. (Morse and Perry, 1990, p. 169)

Morse also concluded that reports of near-death experiences are for the most part stable and consistent, whether recounted by children or adults.

Personal accounts of the near-death phenomenon continue to enjoy wide circulation. Not the least of these was Betty Eadie's 1994 bestseller, *Embraced by the Light* (Eadie and Taylor, 1992). Eadie wrote of her own near-death experience, which turned out to be considerably more detailed than other reports. The core experience immediately following "death," however, was still quite typical. In a hospital for surgery, Eadie found herself becoming weaker and weaker. After hearing a "soft buzzing sound" (Eadie and Taylor, 1992, p. 29) she felt herself leave her physical body. A deep darkness surrounded her, and she felt herself moving forward through it. A "pinpoint of light" (p. 40) appeared in the distance. Getting closer, this light, "far more brilliant than the sun" (p. 40), had the figure of a man in it. Next,
I saw that the light immediately around him was golden .... I felt his light blending into mine, literally, and I felt my light being drawn to his .... And as our lights merged, I felt as if I had stepped into his countenance, and I felt an utter explosion of love. (Eadie and Taylor, 1992, p, 41)

Eadie identified this light with Jesus, and went on to describe a moving account of her life "after death," as well as events in her life following recovery.

Another bestseller in the same category was Dannion Brinkley's *Saved by the Light* (Brinkley and Perry, 1994). Having been struck by lightning, Brinkley experienced a classic near-death episode. He left his physical body, and looked at himself being slid into the ambulance. The medical technician pronounced him "gone," and he saw the eye of a tunnel approaching toward him. The tunnel eventually engulfed him completely, and he heard

the intensely beautiful sound of seven chimes ringing in rhythmic succession.

I looked ahead into the darkness. There was a light up there, and I began to move toward it as quickly as possible .... Ahead the light became brighter and brighter until it overtook the darkness and left me standing in a paradise of brilliant light. This was the brightest light I had ever seen ....

.... It was as though I were seeing a lover, mother, and best friend, multiplied a thousandfold. As the Being of Light came closer, these feelings of love intensified until they became almost too pleasurable to withstand. (Brinkley and Perry, 1994, pp. 8-9)

Brinkley went on to describe how he gained some remarkable psychic abilities after his "return," including the ability to foretell certain future events, and that he remarkably had a second near-death experience during an operation that was supposed to mend a heart weakened by the lightning strike.

Brinkley followed up with a second book, entitled *At Peace in the Light* (Brinkley and Perry, 1995), in which he reported that he continued to have psychic episodes, such as foretelling major world events. Very interesting in relation to his own near-death experience was Brinkley's account of Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. Wilson was reported to have had a mystical experience, without having been near death at all. Brinkley quoted Wilson's account of his experience as follows:

Suddenly, my room blazed with an indescribably white light.... I was seized with an ecstasy beyond description. Every joy I had known
was pale by comparison. The light, the ecstasy — I was conscious of nothing else for a time. (Brinkley and Perry, 1995, p. 152)

The similarities between all of these reports are quite compelling. Indeed, descriptions of this kind have been made throughout history and across cultural boundaries. These kinds of experiences are a core component of human spirituality, and can be found extensively in every major religious tradition in the world.

Several attempts, however brief, already have been made to compare these modern-era experiences with the historical encounter with Divine light and ecstasy in mystical religious writings. In Life After Life, Moody (1975) himself found some significant parallels, noting the vision of blinding light witnessed by St. Paul on the road to Damascus. Moody also made reference to The Tibetan Book of the Dead (Evans-Wentz, 1957/11th century), which offered counsel concerning the many things that we might encounter after death, including an encounter with a clear, pure light. Finally, Moody recounted the experiences of Emanuel Swedenborg, an 18th-century Swedish scientist. Swedenborg claimed that the soul survives bodily death, and described the "light of the Lord" which permeates the hereafter, a light of ineffable brightness," which Swedenborg himself had glimpsed (Moody, 1975, p. 126).

In a follow-up work entitled Reflections on Life After Life, Moody (1977) found more parallels. For example, the Venerable Bede, an 8th-century English monk, told the story of a man who had a near-death experience. After several interesting encounters, the "dead" man came across a clear, bright light. So bright was this light that it seemed "greater than the brightness of daylight, or the sun's rays at noon" (Sherley-Price, 1968, pp. 289–293). Moody also made reference to Leo Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Ilyich (1981/1886), which described the death scene of Ilyich in terms of being in a dark, cavelike space; of having a flashback of his past life; and at last, of entering into a brilliant light.

Frederick Holck drew some interesting parallels between near-death and mystical religious experiences. Holck added to Moody's reading of The Tibetan Book of the Dead that the "nonphysical existence is to the knowing one blissful consciousness in its purest form" (Holck, 1978–79, p. 4). In the same vein, in Zoroastrianism, a dead person is said to experience as much joy in three days as one would normally experience in a lifetime. Holck also pointed out that Plato's myth of Er made reference to a brilliant, pure light. Moreover, such references are not restricted to
near-death experiences: Hinduism’s *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* tells a story of a couple who, praying for Divine help, fell unconscious, and “a light suddenly flashed” (Holck, 1978–79, p. 8). In the Jewish extracanonical tradition, we read of a “radiant light” in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, and the “immeasurable light in heaven” in the *Book of the Secrets of Enoch* and the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*. In Buddhism’s *Saddharma-smṛtyupasthāna Sūtra*, we find that when someone approaches death, “he sees a bright light, and being unaccustomed to it at the time of his death he is perplexed and confused.” (Holck, 1978–79, p. 8).

Carol Zaleski (1987) has found similar parallels in the medieval Christian tradition. When it comes to visions of Divine light, both Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues* and Dante’s *Paradiso* contained descriptions of an “illuminated unifying vision” (Zaleski, 1987, p. 125). While reserving judgment on the validity of near-death accounts, Zaleski acknowledged that the medieval accounts that she examined bore “a striking resemblance” to the modern near-death encounter with a Divine Light (Zaleski, 1987, p. 125).

The parallels drawn to date between modern day and more classic encounters with the light Divine and its unsurpassed joy are quite valid. However, most authors began by drawing broad similarities between the near-death experience in general and comparing that with religious writings. When we narrow the focus to see what happens when we compare the actual encounter with Divine light and ecstasy in near-death experiences with similar reports in the mystical teachings of the world’s major religious traditions, the volume, depth, and breadth of the similarities is compelling.

The most exciting result of this comparison is the commonality of language that is used to describe the Divine encounter. Even across cultures, throughout time, and with the imperfections of translation, we find strikingly similar words being used to tell us what such an experience is like. While descriptions of God, “the gods,” or Ultimate Truth vary wildly from tradition to tradition, we now have a “thread that binds” not only the major religions of the world, but also non-religious spiritual experiences.

The human spiritual encounter with light and ecstasy is also deeply meaningful. It has given lasting new meaning to countless people worldwide and throughout history. Recognizing this as a fundamental aspect of human spirituality may help bind humanity together, rather than set groups apart. For the individual, the realization of this kind of spiritual knowledge can bring about a depth of feeling that would otherwise be beyond our wildest imagination.
Near-Death Experiences in Retrospect

Scientists and academics have not generally accepted the near-death experience as an encounter with the Divine by a "soul" that survives death. In fact, a fairly extensive critical literature has developed contending the contrary, though not all the critics agree on what the cause of the experience might be. Theories range from the influence of an unusual flow of brain chemicals; to the reaction of the dying brain to reduced levels of oxygen; or to purely psychological factors such as dreams, hallucinations, or wish fulfillment. While all of these criticisms offer interesting possibilities, none of them rise above the level of speculation. In short, the critics have no better claim to what the experience really means than anyone else.

Still, critics have raised many points that are well worth considering. One possibility is that the experience could be induced by the influence of drugs. As Aldous Huxley first wrote in 1954, drugs such as mescaline can induce mystical states very similar to the ones that are under investigation. In *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*, Huxley wrote:

> What are the common features which this pattern imposes upon our visionary experiences? First and most important is the experience of light. Everything seen by those who visit the mind's antipodes is brilliantly illuminated and seems to shine from within. All colours are intensified to a pitch far beyond anything seen in the normal state, and at the same time the mind's capacity for recognizing fine distinctions of tone and hue is notably heightened. (Huxley, 1954, p. 89)

Huxley's observations led, in part, to the 1960s drug culture. Well-known authors and respectable academic researchers investigated the validity of drug-induced mystical experiences. In 1966, Walter Pahnke and William Richards found that lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) could produce experiences that corresponded to the essential categories found in the literature dealing with mysticism. These included unity, changes in one's perception of objectivity and reality, transcendence, sacredness, paradoxicality, ineffability, transience, a very positive mood, and positive changes in attitude and behavior. Similarly, Alan Watts (1973), Huston Smith (1964), Stanislav Grof (1972), and Ring (1988) concluded that psychedelic drugs such as mescaline, LSD, and psilocybin were capable of inducing mystical experiences.

Further, psychedelic drugs seemed to be able to induce NDEs or something very much like an NDE. Ronald Siegel (1980) found that phencyclidine (PCP) could induce an experience very much like an
NDE, including images of tunnels and lights, out-of-body states, spirit guides, and a life review. Siegel concluded that NDEs were some form of hallucination that uses images already stored in the brain. Similarly, Jack Provonska (1981) found similarities between NDEs, experiences induced by psychedelic drugs, and carbon dioxide toxicity. Provonska asked rhetorically if NDEs are, by extension, really the work of psychochemicals. This would mean that the NDE is really an experience of the dying process, not death itself. Scott Rogo (1984), in the same vein, reviewed the literature on the parallels between NDEs and the effects of anesthetics, particularly ketamine. He concluded that while no direct causal link could be drawn between the two, the parallels were strong enough to cast doubt on purely metaphysical explanations of the NDE.

Interestingly, psychedelic drugs can even have some of the beneficial aftereffects of undergoing actual NDEs. Pahnke (1969) found that the majority of terminally ill cancer patients who were administered LSD benefited from the treatment. The aftereffects included lessened anxiety and depression, as well as a reduced fear of death. Richards, Grof, Louis Goodman, and Albert Kurland (1972) also concluded that, after having been administered LSD, one third of terminal cancer patients experienced dramatic improvement in outlook regarding their condition. Death was no longer regarded by these patients as an end to all personal existence, but rather "as a transition into a different type of existence" (Richards, Grof, Goodman, and Kurland, 1972, p. 146). Grof (1972-73) found similar, but even more positive results: 27 of 31 patients administered LSD showed improvements in the same areas noted by Pahnke, and those who had "peak" experiences such as unity, transcendence, and sacredness ended up having the most positive and lasting attitude changes of all.

By extension, some argued that the brain itself can manufacture chemicals that act very much like their artificial psychedelic counterparts. Daniel Carr (1981, 1982) argued that β-endorphins and similar brain chemicals that are released during the dying process might trigger the NDE. Even changes to blood pressure in the inner ear can produce the sensation of rising out of the body, floating away in space, and even near-death visions (Burt, 1968).

Several critics of the metaphysical model of the near-death experience have argued that levels of oxygen to the brain, which vary among people who are about to die, can trigger images commonly reported in NDEs. Richard Blacher (1979), in an early rebuttal to Moody's (1975) claim that the NDE may constitute evidence of the
survival of bodily death, claimed that those who have had NDE-like experiences of the type that Moody described were likely suffering from hypoxia. Ernst Rodin (1980) claimed that NDEs were simply hallucinations or delusions caused by the deprivation of oxygen to the brain, based on his analysis of his own near-death experience.

Others have rebutted this brand of criticism. First, of course, not all of those who have had an NDE were under the influence of any drugs or anesthetics. Moreover, β-endorphins cannot in and of themselves account for the whole of the NDE, only perhaps the part dealing with feelings of well-being or ecstasy. Michael Sabom (1980b) took exception to Blacher's claims that NDEs result from hypoxia, on the grounds that persons suffering from oxygen deprivation typically end up with a confused and muddled memory, quite the opposite of the clarity found in the NDE. Further, Sabom (1980a) claimed that Rodin's personal experience was not an NDE at all. Ian Stevenson agreed with Sabom that oxygen deprivation to the brain typically induces a "toxic psychosis" characterized by confusion and mental obfuscation; but this is not at all the kind of report given by those who have had an NDE: rather, the latter "seldom, if ever ... have felt more alive, alert, and mentally clear" (Stevenson, 1980, p. 271).

Other critics have used psychological counterexplanations of the metaphysical model of the NDE. In another response to Rodin's article mentioned above, Nathan Schnaper (1980) supported Rodin's contention that NDEs are probably delusions or hallucinations. Schnaper extended Rodin's thesis, however, to include other possible sources for the experience. These included considerations of physiology, such as hypoxia or anoxia; pharmacology, such as ketamine and other anesthetics and pharmaceuticals; and psychology, such as dissociative reactions, panic, and psychosis. Schnaper concluded that the great public interest in the NDE phenomenon is best understood as death denial.

Ronald Siegel (1980) also contended that NDEs are hallucinations, brought about by psychological and neurophysiological factors, although he admitted that those processes are not yet fully understood. Like Schnaper, Siegel maintained that NDEs are a product of a human imagination longing for an afterlife. Jan Ehrenwald agreed: "most claims of apparent survival near death or after resuscitation result from a blend of hallucinatory wish fulfillment and massive denial of illness in terms of defensive maneuvers" (1978, p. 235). Russell Noyes (1979) concurred that NDE features such as depersonalization serve as a defense mechanism against the threat
of death: the "life review" and other sweeping recollections, he wrote, are likely a result of the dying person attaching him- or herself to memories that will act as reminders of their own existence. Susan Blackmore (1988) added that while NDEs were indeed hallucinations, visions of a tunnel and/or a great light were most likely the result of activity in the visual cortex of a dying brain; survivors transform these images into objective concepts drawn from sensory experience.

Psychoanalysts have come up with additional possible explanations of the NDE phenomenon. According to Uri Lowental (1981), the bliss felt during an NDE is an infantile regression to the memory of the bliss felt under a mother's protection; the "dark tunnel" is a recollection of the mother's birth canal, and the "bright light" would be a memory of the mother's radiant face. Similarly, Glen Gabbard and Stuart Twemlow (1984) surmised that, when viewed psychoanalytically, the "being of light" may represent an internalized parent. Mortimer Ostow (1960) and Narcyz Lukianowicz (1958) agreed that the NDE can be explained in part by ego wish fulfillment.

Some social scientists have concluded that NDEs are akin to dreams that seem very real. Dorothy Counts (1983) found that in New Guinea, the culturally structured nature of out-of-body and NDE accounts suggest that both are the product of a state of mind known as hypnagogic sleep. Similarly, Celia Green (1968) argued that certain aspects of NDEs, such as out-of-body experiences and the travel through a tunnel, are very much like the lucid dream phenomenon, where the subject is aware that he or she is dreaming.

The field of sensory deprivation also has application to the near-death phenomenon. John Lilly (1977) observed that some subjects in sensory deprivation tanks experienced the out-of-body sensation. Even more suggestive is the story of two miners who were trapped underground for six days. The two had hallucinations that included people, a cross, a heavenly garden, and blue lights. The psychiatrists who evaluated these two miners concluded that under conditions as stressful as this, hallucinations serve to address perceived needs (Comer, Madow, and Dixon, 1967).

Psychological explanations of NDEs have raised some very interesting analogies from various aspects of the field. However, none as yet constitute proof that the NDE is caused by one factor or another. There might be some truth in some or all of these explanations, but we have not yet seen any definitive explanation for the whole phenomenon.

In her 1993 book, *Dying to Live: Near-Death Experiences*, Blackmore rejected metaphysical explanations of the NDE. She agreed that NDE
accounts were consistent; however, she did not agree that this consistency constituted proof of an afterlife. Blackmore drew upon various aspects of modern science to demonstrate her contention. For example, the joy and peace people experience are a result of "natural opiates released under stress" (p. 261). The "life review is consistent because the endorphins cause random activation and seizures in the temporal lobe and limbic system where memories are organized" (p. 261). Positive transformations in one's life can be attributed to the fact that one is now thinking about death, which in and of itself is enough to make one "less selfish and more concerned for others" (p. 263). Blackmore concluded that the dying brain hypothesis best explained the near-death phenomenon. She went on to write that there really is no "soul" to survive death: "We are simply here and this is how it is. I have no self and 'I' own nothing. There is no one to die. There is just this moment, and now this and now this" (p. 264).

Blackmore has come up with some interesting possibilities regarding the causes of the NDE, but her work is every bit as conjectural as the metaphysical model. Her book was less a scientific analysis of the phenomenon than a collection of various studies from disparate fields of science that, when put together, give us a physical and psychological alternative to the metaphysical understanding of the NDE. This is really an exposition of Blackmore's beliefs, not anything that approaches scientific proof. Further, as the mystical traditions of the world's religions have shown, one does not have to be near death in order to experience key elements of an NDE. In fact the encounter with the "Divine Light" and the accompanying ecstasy can be achieved by a number of means, none of which has anything to do with a dying brain. I would argue that until we have something more substantial in the way of a purely physical and/or psychological cause for the NDE, metaphysical arguments are still well worth considering.

One point that Blackmore raised that might be worth developing further from a metaphysical point of view is the concept of the self. Blackmore preferred what she defined as the Buddhist position that "neither self nor anything pertaining to self can truly and really be found" (Rahula, 1959, p. 59; cited in Blackmore, 1993, p. 257). Unfortunately, whether intentionally or not, this leaves the impression that Buddhism advocates some form of pure materialism. This is far from the truth. While Buddhism does propose that ultimately the self does not exist, and that the truth beyond the self is nothingness, this does not mean that nothingness is "blackness," or has no intrinsic reality. On the contrary, as we have seen, some scriptures such as
The Tibetan Book of the Dead (Evans-Wentz, 1957/11th century) speak of the "Clear Light of the Void." For Buddhists, the void is vividly real, the ultimate reality, and hardly the cynical nonexistence tacitly referred to by Western materialists.

Ironically, Blackmore's reference to the Buddhist conception of the self can lead us to a new metaphysical understanding of the nature and meaning of life and death. It might be that the soul does not continue to exist indefinitely beyond death, whether in "heaven" or in some form of reincarnation. Buddhist philosophy allows us to see that there might be a state of being beyond this life and even beyond the near-death experience.

A New Focus for the Future

With modern accounts of near-death experiences and the wealth of world religious traditions at our disposal, we are now in a position to propose refocusing our attention on spiritual experiences themselves, not just specific religious interpretations of them. This is not to minimize or attempt to make redundant the differences between traditions; without differences, human expressions of spirituality would not be nearly as rich. However, the differences are abundant and often readily apparent. The common thread, the truth that binds, is more elusive and difficult to define. The thread is there, though, and this is where humanity desperately needs to direct its efforts now.

This approach is necessary because the modern Western preoccupation with materialism has left the present generation increasingly devoid of spiritual meaning. Material reality appears to be so real, so consistent, whereas spirituality in the form of religion or philosophy changes drastically from tradition to tradition and from person to person. What makes one tradition or spiritual philosophy better than the other? The purely materialistic worldview, on the other hand, does not need to prove or demonstrate the existence of any truth beyond that which we can see, hear, touch, taste, or smell. It is no wonder, then, that such an obvious worldview as materialism has gained so many adherents.

Spiritual worldviews still exist, though, and in many forms. I contend that these persist, and will continue to persist, because of spiritual experiences. Such experiences come in a variety of forms, but typically are enough to transform one's view of reality. The mystical experience, in particular, of which the near-death experience is one
form, is the one that I will now use to "sew the thread" of a common human spirituality.

Mystics often say that the mystical experience is extremely rare. That might be true, if we expect to find exactly the same experience, let alone exactly the same interpretation of the experience, in every reported instance. Viewed more broadly, however, the mystical experience in all its forms might be much more common than is generally assumed. Mystical experiences range from a feeling of elevated spiritual joy to visions of Divinity to oneness with the universe. In this essay, I have focused more specifically on the mystic encounter with light and ecstasy. This aspect of mysticism is directly parallel to the reports of an encounter with a "being of light" in the near-death experience. This demonstrates that the same experience can be found across cultures and throughout time. It also suggests that with the growing number of reports of near-death experiences, the phenomenon is not as rare as some might believe.

An even more common form of the mystical experience is that of spiritual ecstasy alone. In modern Christian revivalism, the experience of joy in Christ or the Holy Spirit is a cornerstone of the movement. Revivalist, "born-again," or "charismatic" Christians report a depth of religious feeling that has to be considered at some level a form of mystical experience. Given that this form of religious expression is quite common, so too then must be this aspect of the mystical experience. The interpretation of exactly what that experience means for that category of Christian is often, of course, at variance with the interpretation of others who have undergone the same kind of encounter. Nonetheless, reports of the phenomenon are found well beyond the Christian fold. Again this suggests that the experience itself is not so rare; it is more likely the specific interpretations of the experience that make an individual or a movement seem so unique or special.

One of the most common forms of the mystical experience, then, is the joyful encounter with a loving spiritual being, the kind so often reported in various forms of religious revivalism. Related to this, although not quite as common, is the encounter with Divine Light, as I have described. Probably the least common is the complete union of the soul with the Divine. Other phenomena, such as the perceived separation of the soul from the body, might be included as aspects of the mystical experience. These are all part of a journey toward a single end: spiritual communion with the Divine. The vision of spiritual light and the feeling of ecstasy let us know that the Divine not only exists,
but exists in resplendent and loving glory. Union allows us to catch a glimpse of what might be the final resting place of humanity, the soul’s ultimate destination.

This leads us back to the concept of the self, which was brought up by Blackmore. In the final analysis, there might not be an “eternal” human soul, as Blackmore suggested. Becoming truly and fully immersed in the Divine might not leave much room for personal identity. Blackmore argued in favor of a more immediate extinction of the personality, but since she raised Buddhist philosophy in support of her contention that “there is no self,” then we should examine that concept in the light of the larger Buddhist tradition. Blackmore was, consciously or otherwise, quoting the views of the Theravada (“the school of the elders”) sect of Buddhism, an ancient but minority view in the Buddhist tradition. The majority view is found in Mahayana (“greater vehicle”) Buddhism, which also agrees that ultimately there is no “self” as we perceive it in this life. Meanwhile, however, we do have perceptions in this life that not only seem real but that we have to work with, regardless of ultimate reality. One of these present realities is the concept of personal identity. The concept of self is perfectly acceptable as long as we do not make any distinctions between ourselves and other things.

The extinction of the self in Mahayana Buddhism is very much like the identification of Atman and Brahman in the Hindu tradition, and similar to the union of the soul with God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In Mahayana Buddhism, it is perfectly legitimate to worship God or the gods, as this will help draw us closer to the Ultimate Enlightenment. Once we do achieve enlightenment, however, both the gods and the self disappear, because we realize that all is One. Blackmore was therefore making a huge leap to that tenet of Buddhism that holds that ultimately there is no self. This is a far cry from the conviction of the majority stream of Buddhism that says that, as long as we are in this life and not One with the highest reality, the concept of the self is perfectly legitimate. Considerable qualification is needed, then, before we can accept Blackmore’s contention that Buddhists would support her claim that there is no soul to survive bodily death.

That being said, Blackmore did raise an interesting challenge to her opponents in the field of near-death studies, because those who have undergone a near-death experience have not been “dead” for very long. What happens after this initial process? Does the perceived “disembodied soul” continue to exist in a separate existence, either in heaven or in hell, forever? If we accept the doctrine of reincarnation, does this
mean that we are going to be born, die, and be born again forever? Or, as Blackmore and others would have it, do we simply cease to exist the moment after we die?

An analysis of the mystical experience can help us understand the near-death experience and perhaps even reconcile it with the major religious traditions of the world. Even in its most elementary form, the mystical experience is literally awesome, as is the near-death experience. If we can imagine what it would be like to be as awe-struck as the near-death experiencer, it is easy to see why someone might view the experience as an encounter with some spiritual being that is much greater than and separate from oneself, that is, God. On the other hand, one might conclude that since this happened within oneself, then there might just be much more to oneself than previously assumed, even to the point that Divinity resides within oneself.

Those who have a mystical experience while they are members of a given tradition are likely to interpret the experience within the doctrine of the tradition concerned. This often leads to an identification of the experience with the interpretation, such as “God's Holy Spirit has come to me,” or “I have experienced nirvana.” Unfortunately, too strict an adherence to an all-encompassing interpretation of such a deeply felt experience can lead to fundamentalism, intolerance, and cultism. The field of near-death studies is particularly refreshing in this regard, because its focus is still on the experience itself, and the interpretations generally make reference to the pure experience. Such a focus would be very helpful in breathing new spiritual and intellectual life into religion.

After all, if profound spiritual experiences do not have relevance in religion, than what does? All major religious traditions have plenty of examples of these occurrences, both historically and more than likely even within their current memberships. Further, by looking at the religious experiences of traditions other than one's own, we would see how others could develop different ways of looking at a common spiritual source.

Clearly there are other religious experiences besides mystical ones. Some are downright terrifying, and others visionary, without any relation to the mystical vision. The mystical experience is unique only because the language used to describe it is so similar from tradition to tradition. Near-death experiences are largely consistent with mystical accounts, which speaks well for the continuity of the phenomenon. If we can broaden near-death research to include more fully the religious mystical experience, then we can deepen our understanding of both
fields. And if we keep both fields focused on the experience itself, then we might come up with new and better interpretations of it.

Meanwhile, recognizing a common human spirituality has great personal and social value. For the individual, this might be the sense of spiritual meaning that so many find lacking in a materialistic society. For society, it might mean removal of the veil of bigotry that has characterized too many religious movements for far too long. Society might grow to appreciate our common spiritual heritage as we share our experiences, while being able to respect the various ways that we interpret them.

References


An Anthropological Perspective on Near-Death-Like Experiences in Three Men's Pregnancy-Related Spiritual Crises

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ABSTRACT: In this article I bring a transpersonal perinatal anthropological perspective to the study of three fathers' near-death-like experiences. I compare Kenneth Ring's descriptions of prototypical near-death experiences (NDEs) with the "spiritual emergencies" of these three New Zealand men during their partners' pregnancies. Their experiences show significant similarities to the classic NDE pattern outlined by Ring (1989). Moreover, these NDE-like experiences appear to unfold in a perinatal sequence as described by Stanislav Grof (1985) and Christopher Bache (2000), adding weight to the notion that a "deep structure" lies behind shamanic initiations, NDEs, and unidentified flying object (UFO) encounters (Ring, 1989). I explore these seemingly anomalous male birth/death/rebirth experiences and draw some parallels with what some Western researchers have called "the shamanic crisis," and I compare their stories with the symbolic reproductive maneuvers of shaman midwives.

KEY WORDS: birth; near-death experience; fatherhood; midwifery; perinatal matrices; shamanism.

White man got no dreaming, Him go 'nother way. White man, him go different, Him got road belong himself.

Stanner, 1956, p. 51

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Women's "maternity cults," female shamanistic midwifery, "male midwifery," and the couvade syndrome of male sympathetic pregnancy behavior and rituals have not been studied comprehensively as transpersonal events in anthropology, nor have these research topics been related to the study of near-death experiences (NDEs). This lack is due in part to outdated research epochs, the gender inequalities that beset early anthropology, and in part to the political imperatives or fashions driving research priorities. Early anthropology was exclusively a male endeavor, and men were not welcomed in female birthing sites and women's birth magic and shamanism remained largely a secret. Western medical and political colonization also severely impacted traditional birth rituals (Kitzinger, 1982; Laderman, 1983), further marginalizing the nature of their meaning and magic.

With the rise of the women's movement in the 1970s, birthing became a central concern for feminist researchers, although understandably most feminist anthropologists have paid scant attention to male birthing rites and reproductive magic. Like their male anthropological forebears, they have produced a similar set of gender biases, among them the erroneous belief that fathers have little or nothing to do with childbirth in non-Western cultures (Bates and Turner, 2003; Heggenhougen, 1980; Lahood, 2006; Priya, 1992).

It is interesting to note that according to Kris Heggenhougen, in many indigenous cultures men are very busy with definitive symbolic performances, "believed to bear directly on the outcome of the birth of his child" (1980, pp. 21–22), which have great social and psychological significance. Husbands diligent in their performance are seen to be integral participants in birthing, as their suffering symbolically relieves the woman's fear in proportion to which they can perform the suffering (Heggenhougen, 1980).

This study concerns the pregnancy-related near-death-like experiences of three contemporary New Zealand males from a transpersonal anthropological perspective (Laughlin, 1990, 1994). However, given anthropologists' conceptual struggle to find a useful vantage point for the viewing of this material, I will delve into the ethnographic literature concerning spiritual midwifery, symbolic obstetrical maneuvers, and NDEs to construct a paradigm to view these extraordinary events.

**Birth and the NDE**

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are reported to have multiple causes among Westerners (Carr, 1993). The cause most pertinent to
this article would be women's NDEs catalyzed by labor and birthing. Bruce Greyson has on file some 60 to 70 cases of women who have reported NDEs during labor and childbirth (B. Greyson, personal communication, October 4, 2004), and reports of NDEs have surfaced from women who gave birth while under anesthesia (Greyson and Bush, 1992). Kenneth Ring (1989, p. 16), in an article addressing shamanic initiations, included what he called a prototypical shamanistic initiation-type NDE from a birth-giving mother (see also Bache, 2000; Grof, 1998; and Grof and Halifax, 1977).

Various dynamics of the birthing process have been significantly related to NDEs by Stanislav Grof and his colleagues (Grof, 1977, 1985; Grof and Grof, 1980, 1989; Grof and Halifax, 1977) and Christopher Bache (1996, 2000). Grof has comprehensively explored adult recollections of fetal trauma and the overlapping interface of birth, sex, and death in the human unconscious from the perspectives offered through psychotherapy with d-lysergic acid (LSD) and holotropic research (1975, 1985, 1988; Grof and Grof, 1980). From Grof's perspective, the perinatal level of the psyche is close-knit with a dynamic existential/death constellation and is meaningfully related to women giving birth, with birth trauma, the dynamics of psychospiritual death/rebirth, and with the near-death experience (Grof, 1985).

NDEs then have been linked to birthing, generally from the birthing woman's perspective, which of course is not at all surprising given the dramatic nature of women's birth-giving physiology, the cognitive restructuring that can occur from the ordeal of labor, and, in principle, the encounter with death that birth can represent. Men's experience of birth, on the other hand, tends to be culturally submerged and in many ways rendered invisible. Men are represented as mute "observers" or "witnesses" of women's birth-giving and they are assumed to be somewhat divorced as participants, even though they may be having their own experiences of the impressive biological event. Again, this neglect of a proper analysis of the male experience of a birth event is understandable when weighed against the rigors of the female birthing configuration and the hypermedicalized context of most Western births.

The Spectrum of Death

In 2001 I initiated transpersonal anthropological research (Laughlin, 1988, 1994; Peters, 1994, 1996; Young and Goulet, 1994) with
procreative males specifically to find out if transpersonal states of consciousness emerged during what Judith Richman (1982) called their “pregnancy careers,” their experiences during the course of their partners’ pregnancies, from conception and gestation through labor and birth to the postpartum period. I recorded interviews with 40 fathers and 12 mothers in “conversational anthropology,” defined by Adam Kuper as “a conversation ... implicating ethnographers, informants and the ancestral voices they invoke in their conversations” (1994, p. 55). Clearly for some men transpersonal phenomena were a portion of their experience, while for others, transpersonal disclosures actually defined their experience of witnessing or participating in a birth. However, almost all fathers I interviewed described a meaningful psychological or emotional encounter with the possibility of death evoked over the duration of the pre- and perinatal episode, that is, around conception, gestation, labor, birth, and the postpartum period.

The interviews I conducted and the anecdotes I collected included a number of associations to death, impermanence, mortality, and ancestry. Of the 40 fathers I interviewed, several of them described a birth experience as being like a car accident, one man felt as if he were at an ancient funeral service, another at a butchery. Some men described their experiences of being present at the moment of birth as having a similar “energetic” feeling to that of being with a loved one at death. Several men reported out-of-body experiences, dissociation, ordeals, and comparisons to LSD use, as well as comparisons with spiritual states of consciousness and “peak experiences” in which the Western dichotomy between life and death was momentarily erased (Lahood, 2006).

**Death Encounters, Vampires, and Shamans**

An example from my fieldwork comes from a 40-year-old American diplomat, Michael, an émigré to New Zealand describing his first night with his child, during which he kept a vigil over his son to make sure that his son did not stop breathing – in other words, to make sure he did not die. He said he was awake most of the night in what he described as an “exhausting 12-hour peak experience” that “wrecked me” and from which he needed to recover. Michael described his experience as follows:

At the time I put this down to jet lag and extreme tiredness or
just adrenalin but there was something like a semi-out-of-body experience. . . . It's like I knew I was still in my body, but getting up on my elbow to look at my son breathing wasn't like I'm doing it now. It was like my consciousness was rising up, not my body. And saying it like that does not satisfy me as it comes out of my mouth . . . . It's like . . . I don't know if you ever read Interview with the Vampire [Rice, 1976]. It might sound like I digress, but there's a passage in there where Lestat, the original vampire in that story, creates . . . makes Lewis into a vampire. And there's this process of drawing blood, putting blood back, making him take blood, and that starts a process that lasted through the night of his body dying. In other words, he doesn't need to eat anymore, and the shit he has is the last shit he'll ever have, and he goes into the forest and essentially his old self gets flushed out of him. It's kind of an interesting passage, better than I can recall it, but at the same time his otherworldly body takes over where he's got these extra senses: better sight, better hearing, stuff like that. I'd say my experience was kind of like that. It's kind of a semi-out-of-the-body experience where the body seemed to be dying away.

It is not hard to spot the death-rebirth imagery throughout his narrative. This image of blood-sucking vampirism, transformation, of the “body dying away” as it is replaced by “otherworldly” powers, bears a striking resemblance to classic descriptions of the dismemberment, demonic encounter, and resurrection sequences found in Siberian shamanic initiations. The shaman-to-be, having come close to death, somehow enters a visionary world filled with demons where he or she can have the flesh torn from his or her skeleton, entrails removed, blood drained, and organs replaced with precious stones (Eliade, 1964).

According to Joan Halifax, the neophyte shaman is drawn into his or her career often through an initiatory NDE:

those who have nearly died, through an accident or severe illness, or who have suffered a psychological or spiritual trauma . . . the encounter with death and dying and the subsequent experience of rebirth and illumination are the authentic initiation for the shaman. (Halifax, 1979, p. 5)

Halifax has also connected biological birth to shamanism's initiatory NDE: “Although this process frequently takes the form of an inner experience, the symbolism and feelings have many unusual parallels in the experience of actual biological birth” (1979, p. 5).

Three fathers in my study appeared to participate in what is called a spiritual emergency (Grof and Grof, 1989) and showed ritual activity and self-initiation behaviors (Bateson, 1972; Peters 1994). These three men described experiences that contained several elements found in prototypical NDEs. Their experiences were potent and life-changing:
one man joined a Christian charismatic church afterwards, fearing he had been possessed by the devil; another was hospitalized for a time in a psychiatric unit; the third gave up surfing.

I will focus first on two of these experiences, comparing them with what Ring has called prototypic NDEs (1989), paying attention to the elements of shamanic initiation and the UFO encounter which they each appear to approximate. I think it is important to reiterate here that it is an encounter with death or the prospect of death, and certain thematic resonances, certain similarities in structure, symbolism, and pattern that these men experience, rather than the "classic" NDE. Yet this is also what makes them so compelling: that, and their relationship to the birth process. Ring described the archetypical NDE pattern as follows:

This pattern is made up of such elements as (1) a psychological sense of separation from the physical body; (2) a feeling of overwhelming peace and well-being; (3) a sense of movement through a dark but not frightening space, sometimes described as a "tunnel"; (4) the perception of brilliant white or golden light by which one is (5) gradually encompassed and from which one (6) feels a sense of total love and unconditional acceptance; (7) an encounter with a "being of light" or other spiritual entities who (8) may afford the occasion for a panoramic life review following which (if it occurs) one (9) may decide or be told to "return to one's own body," thereby (10) terminating the NDE. Such experiences tend to cohere in a highly meaningful way for the individual, are almost always said to be "hyper-real," (i.e., not like a dream or hallucination), and usually have a profound transformative effect on the survivor. (Ring, 1989, p. 14)

Hyperreal Alterity Scapes

Ring has claimed that near-death researchers are "virtually unanimous in insisting that these experiences do not and cannot suggest the existence of an afterlife" (1990, p. 204). As Bache has written:

[Ring's] articulation of the parallels between transcendent NDEs and the mystical experiences that emerge in various meditative disciplines demonstrated that nearly dying is but a trigger that catapults persons with some consistency into higher states of consciousness that can also be cultivated through any number of consciousness expanding techniques. (Bache, 2000, p. 110)

Therefore the human encounter with death is a catalyst to transpersonal events, and transpersonal events can be a catalyst to an encounter with death.
Like these researchers, I believe such encounters and the spirited worlds they disclose are real and not fantasy. They belong to a category of “culture” and “reality” that I think of as “alterity-scapes”— alterity in Michael Taussig’s sense of an otherworld, or alter-world, a cosmic landscape associated with a culturally imbedded belief system or disclosed in a transpersonal state (Taussig, 1993); and scape after Arjun Appadurai’s list of “global flows” he called ethnoscapes, finnancescapes, technoscapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes (Appadurai, 1996, pp. 33–37). Henri Corbin called these mind-worlds the mundus imaginalis, after the Persian alam al mithal (Corbin, 1969, 1976); Terrence McKenna called them “hyper-space” (1982); and Michael Grosso called them “the next environment for the psychosocial evolution of man” (1985). James Hillman (1975) has also argued for the irreducible reality of autochthonic imaginals (Ring, 1989, p. 19).

Anthropologists have long noted the existence of such worlds, albeit from shifting epistemological standpoints. In a report more than 100 years old, Edward Tylor observed that the “land of Torngarsuk” to where a Greenlander’s soul travels at death, after descending down a bloody slide for five days, is a place of perpetual summer with “good water, birds, fish and seals and reindeer without end” that are caught without trouble, or are found already cooking in a huge pot (1878, p. 296). This suggests an alterity-scape well meshed to the desires of the locals: it is an afterlife that, when pared down, shrouds the deceased in the best of her or his beloved environment and gives unending warmth, light, nourishment, and leisure, a pattern many cultures ascribe to their heavenly abodes. Tylor, like all of us, was a product of his times, and saw in these systems no truth value for humankind, believing they belonged to what he called the “whole monstrous farrago” of primitive religion (cited in Tambiah, 1990, p. 45).

Times have changed. Contemporary transpersonal anthropologists interested in the field of “waking dreams” make efforts to penetrate the alterity-scape of their host culture, seeing the experience as an essential form of data gathering and research (Laughlin, 1994). My personal experience of two such spiritual landscapes was paradoxical: they “felt” as if they were supra-ordinated or already existing, and so I experienced myself participating in a mind-world that had some sort of pre-existing status; and yet these alterity-scapes seemed also to be in a condition of co-creation with the human participatory imagination (Ferrer, 2002; Heron, 1998; Tarnas, 1991), where I found myself a central creative actor in the cosmic landscape. Corbin referred to this phenomenon as the imaginial world, which does not reduce to
mechanistic notions of imagination but rather to what Ring called the "cumulative product of imaginative thought itself" (1990, p. 209), unfettered by Cartesian dualism. At death, he wrote, we are liberated into this imaginal realm.

**Ancestral Alterity**

I will now present the first of my participant’s accounts of an experience with perinatal and near-death overtones. Again, I am not suggesting that these are near-death experiences, but I think they are similar enough to NDEs to be of scholarly and practical import. This story is from a young man in his late 20s of European and Maori descent who had only recently had a child. In the first trimester of his child’s fetal existence the man, who lived by a beach, went surfing, as he often did. While surfing he was dumped under the waves and thrown beneath some large rocks and seaweed, where he was dangerously entangled. He told me that he had an acute sense that he might die as he struggled to free himself, and then, at a point of near-drowning, a “vortex” opened in his mind, in which he beheld his “ancestors slowly circling in a golden funnel.” These ancestors communicated to him knowledge of how to become a “good man.” He then had to tear himself out of his wetsuit to struggle free; he emerged out of the sea naked. This “accident” was extremely meaningful to him and he recounted it in direct relation to his child’s conception and her movement toward birth. He felt that his ancestors had orchestrated the moment, and that his frightening spiritual flashpoint had something to do with readying himself and the cosmos for the child’s entrance into the world.

Ring observed that there is a “substantial phenomenological overlap” (1990, p. 209) between shamanic initiation and NDEs obvious to students of the field. The story above contains many such initiatory themes. Particularly potent is the shedding of his skin, which has the hallmark of shamanic dismemberment and rebirth. Clearly undergirding the story is a perinatal template: the child leaves the good womb, suffers constriction and struggle culminating in an encounter with death, followed by liberation. This pattern is consistent with Grof’s description of perinatal matrices (1985, 1988).

This man identified himself as Maori, and Maori culture embeds an ancestor-bearing cosmology of multiple dimensions. Original creation is the template for all creation and is specifically recapitulated at the
birth of children. Thus a brush with his luminous, all-knowing ancestors in a “golden funnel” may be, in part, contextually mediated by cultural imagination and heritage. James Henare, a Maori elder and orator, described the Maori oral tradition as

a veritable treasure house of genius, wit, condensed wisdom and silent telepathy in the storied souls of our ancestors calling across the ages to their descendants struggling toward the light. (cited in M. Henare, 2001, p. 199)

Students of mythology may also be familiar with the figure of Maui, the trickster demigod of the South Pacific, who in his great “overreaching crime” (Alpers, 1985, p. 70) transformed himself into a “caterpillar that glistens” (Alpers, 1985, p. 70) and entered the vagina of Hine Nui Te Po, a goddess related to death. One version of this story reads:

What you see there is Hine Nui, flashing where the sky meets the earth. Her body is like a woman’s, but the pupils of her eyes are greenstone and her hair is kelp. Her mouth is that of a barracuda and in the place where men enter her she has sharp teeth of obsidian and greenstone. (Alpers, 1985, p. 67)

In the story, the little birds accompanying Maui on his quest began to laugh as he wriggled into her in the place “where man enters the world” (Best, 1982, p. 378), and she awakened and crushed him to death in the rocks and kelp of her cosmic vagina (tawhito), heralding the birth of mortality by way of rebirth.

**Angels and Aliens: Hyphenating-Alterity**

Another New Zealand father, a medical technician of European descent, told me this rather poignant story. He had recently gone through a painful marital separation after his partner became pregnant by another man. He had moved to a new house with several acres of land with his two children, and a week away from the birth of his ex-wife’s new child he had the following experience. One night he awoke to what he thought was the sound of an angel’s wings beating above his head and at the end of bed. Startled, he panicked and ran outside naked with only a blanket pulled around his shoulders. He fled across a field in the middle of the night to a small cave his two children had hollowed out in a bank. He told me that he crawled inside the hole and drew himself into a fetal position with the blanket wrapped around him. He said that as the first light of morning began to dawn
and the birds began to sing, he found it increasingly difficult to breathe, and he believed he was going to suffocate to death: “I thought I was dying.” He told me that he could now hear the sound of a fleet of alien spacecraft landing all around the cave area, and he imagined a group of luminous alien beings had come to escort him to another level. As this was occurring he was also running out of breath, and at the moment of his “death” he threw off the blanket and threw himself out of the mouth of the cave into the light of the UFOs. He said he was shocked to realize, in that split second, that the spaceships and aliens were not there, and that he would not die.

This is not, of course, a full-blown NDE, nor yet an alien “abduction” experience. Rather it appears to be an emotional crisis or spiritual emergency induced by his marital loss and its challenging circumstance. Nevertheless, the “deep structure” is telling. Again, anyone familiar with perinatal dynamics would recognize his journey through the four birth matrixes. And indeed several commentators have linked UFO abductions to the sequential unfolding of unconscious perinatal memories (Lawson, 1987; Thompson, 1989). The aftermath appeared to have been even more frightening for this man because he did not understand the experience. He told me he went to his local library and found two possibilities there: either he was psychotic or he was possessed by the devil. He opted for joining a local charismatic church, which offered him an opportunity for exorcism by way of full baptismal immersion, a sense of cosmological safety in Jesus, and the anchor of human community.

The way that both angels and aliens made an appearance in his experience is interesting. He seemed to be caught between two symbol systems and conflicting cultural narratives for describing his event; yet they may not be as disparate as they appear. McKenna (1982) pointed out some of the similar patterns associated with accounts of angels and aliens. Angels, like aliens, are related to hyperreal dimensionality. Angels, like aliens, are hard to get hold of and will not be pinned down like tropical butterflies; yet they inhabit the pathways of belief in so many cultures and populate the sky of so many minds, where they seem hover at the breach between this world and another one. Aliens, like angels, are seen as light beings, harbingers of the Other-real, intermediaries, saviors, bearers of advanced technological wisdom enabling them to slip from one dimension to another with lightening speed: chariots-of-fire techno-angels. According to McKenna (1982), in our technocratic culture angels must come clothed in a technological apotheosis so as to be recognized.
There is also an ancient Judaic spiritual practice whose mention seems germane to this discussion. It is one that can be seen as an analogue to what we might consider to be more overtly "shamanic" cultures: the Merkabah or chariot practices. According to Roger Walsh, its practitioners tried to recreate Ezekiel's vision of the divine chariot. After rigorous prayer and discipline, practitioners would experience themselves as ascending through the seven heavens and confronting fearful guardians until they were finally granted a vision of the throne of God. (Walsh, 1995, p. 36)

Concentrative prayers were known as kavanah, which is ultimately depicted as "a loving intimacy, a clinging to God" (Katz, 1978, p. 35):

The Jewish mystic performs his special mystical devotions and meditations ... in order to purify his soul, i.e. to remove the soul from its entrapment in the material world in order to liberate it for its upward spiritual ascent culminating in devekuth. (Katz, 1978, p. 38)

This pattern is also observed in Mohammed's "Night of the Mirage," where the Prophet was dismembered and purified by angels and flown through hell and up through seven layered heavens into a final self-annihilating encounter with the Throne of Allah (Armstrong, 1991, pp. 138–141; Eliade, 1964, p. 377; Grof and Grof, 1980, p. 41).

While the three father's frameworks in my study varied in surface content, they shared a logical consistency that paralleled the perinatal stencil. They appeared to shape their respective pre-birth crises with language that fit closely with the unfolding perinatal matrices through, in, and around the human psyche. Furthermore, these meaningful pre-birth enactments and ritual-like behaviors included a symbolic, imaginal, or real encounter with death and the use of environmental surfaces symbolic of the womb (for example, under the sea and in a cave) to mediate their crises, which then opened out onto an otherworldly alterity-scape, peopled, respectively, by illumined ancestors and aliens. We can discern in these narratives close parallels to some of Ring's prototypical patterns of NDEs from both the shamanistic and UFO categories.

These male narratives would appear to suggest that conception, gestation, and birth could, for some men, catalyze their own perinatal psyche in a spiritual emergency, which is reported to have a near-death component (Bache, 2000; Bragdon, 1988; Grof and Grof, 1980, 1989). It is possible, then, that their own perinatal memories, which, according to Grof and Bache, are linked with collective representations
of birth, death, and rebirth, can be activated when they participate in procreation and become fathers. Then, by force of their dynamism, these energies find their way into world through the spontaneous ritual-making activity and "religious" encounters that Gregory Bateson called "self-initiation" (1972, p. 328; see also Peters, 1996, 1994). Bateson believed that such instances were not conventionally pathological but "trans-contextual" experiences (1972, p. 272), meaning that they could also be artistic and performative but had transcended any one context.

I do not mean here to minimize nor aggrandize psychopathology, but these anomalous male experiences could be read as primal responses to participation in the reproductive cycle. These primal responses may generate autonomic symbolic processes, potentially replay the father's own perinatal matrices, and include a symbolic or real encounter with death, with the potential for participatory and transpersonal disclosures, and, when full-blown, an "endogenous rite of passage" that does not have exogenous social support and validating belief systems (Bateson, 1961, cited in Peters, 1994, p. 6).

The appraisal of procreative men's more anomalous psychospiritual experiences viewed through perinatal contexts can legitimize their experiences in a fundamental way by placing these experiences within the greater transpersonal context. They may now be appraised against a backdrop that extends conventional psychiatric nosology to encompass spiritual emergencies, or developmental crises subsumed in a larger transpersonal developmental orientation.

**Midwives in Hyperspace**

I will turn now to another interesting parallel, which, while potentially contentious, is pertinent: traditional or indigenous midwifery techniques found in the anthropological record (Bates and Turner, 2003; Cosminsky, 1982; Kitzinger, 1982; Laderman, 1983; Lewis, 2003; McClain, 1989; Paul and Paul, 1975; Potter, 1974; Sered, 1994; Taussig, 1992). Many of these examples have transpersonal features in them, which I believe have a bearing on my informants' stories. Indeed, I would argue that NDEs found among ancient midwifery parallel the crises experienced by my informants around pregnancy. I will use this discussion to introduce my last informant's extraordinary narrative and to connect NDEs, pregnancy, and shamanistic midwifery.
I began this article by saying that women's birthgiving has been related in various ways to the NDE, and that Ring has described one woman's NDE in childbirth as a shamanic initiation. I would like to develop his theme from a midwife-as-shaman perspective. It is the business of the shaman to enter and exit transpersonal alterity-scapes while in ecstatic trance or shamanic flight, thought by the locals to be concomitant with the worlds of death. Michael Harner has also noted the overlap between spiritual practice and death:

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

What is perhaps less well known is the profound and complex relationship between female midwife/shamans, birth, death, and alterity-scapes found in many cultures. Midwives too can fly into hyperspace in the service of birth-giving women (Paul and Paul, 1975; Potter, 1974). In some cultures such visionary states are seen as evidence of "divine election" of a midwife, the "wandering of the future practitioner's spirit into the realm of the supernatural" (Paul and Paul, 1975, p. 712). Such transpersonal visions assume a form of divine "authoritative knowledge" that ameliorates the fears of the birth-giving mother.

Lois and Benjamin Paul (1975) showed examples of what Mircea Eliade (1964) called the "ecstatic journey" among neophyte Guatemalan midwives:

Once she was walking along a path to the neighboring village. … She suddenly found herself in a huge carpeted chamber inside the hill. On a dais sat a number of deceased midwives completely white from head to toe. (Paul and Paul, 1975, p. 712)

The deceased midwives then instructed her on the ethics and morality required for her practice. This is not dissimilar to my Maori informant’s experience described above.

Initiation-like experiences can come through the encounter with death in the psychic and biological "dismemberment" of labor, which opens a culturally imagined alterity-scape to them and where they establish psychic connections with ancestor spirits during their abortive or near-abortive reproductive crises. An example of this kind of phenomenon was noted by Carol Laderman, who wrote that Malaysian women in "the last extremities" of childbirth can be assisted by
beneficent "supernatural presences" known as the "Seven Celestial Midwives" (Laderman, 1983, p. 132). She wrote of a woman in labor for days alone when

Suddenly seven beautiful smiling ladies descended from the sky. They eased her pain, delivered her baby, and washed the mother and child. When they had finished, they ascended once more to kayangan (etymologically) Siva's heaven. (Laderman, 1983, p. 132)

Women's birthing here is a cosmological event linking her labor to a Hindu heaven. Inasmuch as contact with "heaven" is generally reserved for the deceased, her childbirth experiences appeared to be related to the afterlife. Importantly, it was most frequently the death of a child that initiated women into their careers as midwives, ritual specialists, or shamans. The "possession sickness" observed by Youngsook Harvey (1980) among Korean female shamans began with a series of stillbirths; Paul and Paul (1975) described similar patterns among Guatemalan midwives. Jack Potter wrote that three Cantonese shamans (mann seag phox) began their careers after the deaths of up to six children:

In each case the woman became a shaman only after a severe crisis—the death of several children, of her husband, or both. After her traumatic loss, each of the women was visited in her dreams by her children's spirits, who urged her to become a shaman. [Deceased children, who mediate between their mother and the supernatural world, are essential to the career as a spirit medium.] ... Usually the struggle between the unwilling woman and her insistent children goes on for some time. As the pressure on the woman increases, she suffers attacks of seeming madness, during which she jumps around the house, leaps on top of tables, answers questions nonsensically, and so on. Finally the reluctant candidate appears to die, and she must choose between becoming a spirit medium and dying permanently. (Potter, 1974, p. 226)

Ioan Lewis, following the classic work by Sergei Shirokogoroff (1935), has asserted that the shaman's career begins with an unsolicited, unpredictable, and uncontrolled "initial traumatic experience" (Lewis, 1986, p. 88). Shirokogoroff called this uncontrolled possession state a psychosis that eventually had to be "mastered" (Shirokogoroff, 1935, p. 366). For Lewis, this initial traumatic connection with a spirit world then evolves into the capacity for intentional "mystical flight and other 'out of body experiences'" (Lewis, 1986, p. 88).

Therefore, we can say that what starts out as a birth-giving crisis, such as loss of a child, near-death, dissociation, or intense pain, can
include a recapitulation of a woman’s own birth trauma, which can approximate an NDE, or the “shamanic crisis” (see also Grof, 1977, 1998). The chaotic “shamanic crisis” is then honed over time into a therapeutic maneuver that combines access to a cosmological alterity-scape through spiritual flight and/or the capacity of the shaman “permanently” to incarnate her spirits (Lewis, 1986, p. 85). These ideas give further credence to Ring’s alignment of mystical consciousness provoked through meditative practices with the NDE.

The following, from Potter’s study of Cantonese shaman/midwives, shows the integral elegance of a culturally shaped and well-honed shamanistic complex, a condensed experience fusing actual reproduction, perinatal dynamics, “shamanistic crisis,” and imaginal alterity, into beautiful symmetry, illustrating all three levels of what Grof called the holotropic mind: the biographical, the perinatal, and the transpersonal level:

She jerked spasmodically and mumbled incoherent phrases. Then she started to sing a stylized, rhythmic chant, as her familiar spirits [the souls of her own dead children] possessed her and led her soul upward, away from the phenomenal world into the heavens. Their destination was the Heavenly Flower Gardens. (Potter, 1974, p. 208)

In the Cantonese paradise there are four Heavenly Flower Gardens, which are linked to earthly women’s uteri. Every living person is represented by a potted flowering plant tended by two female deities; it is they who strengthen children or allow them to die: “When a woman conceives a child, a heavenly flower is planted in one of the small gardens, and a seed is sent down from heaven into the uterus of the woman” (Potter, 1974, p. 13). The shaman flies into this culturally prescribed alterity-scape specifically to “inspect the flowers” (Potter, 1974, p. 214), to reconnoiter the condition of her Earthly client’s uterus and its reproductive potential.

Thus shaman/midwives can utilize culturally refined altered states of conscious to engage the spirit world of their ancestors: human birthing bodies fused with generative cosmic bodies. These worlds are concomitant with the posthumous landscape, a theme portrayed succinctly in the title of Alma Gottlieb’s recent work, The Afterlife is Where We Come From (2004). These perspectives suggest that the realm of death and the living womb somehow interpenetrate. The psychic reach of the shaman/midwife could extend into another world, the realm of the ancestors, in an effort to ensure the near-born a place in the touchable world.
Slipping into the Great Mother

There is also a widespread pattern to consider of male ritual and trance specialists (shamans) engaging in the crises of obstructed birthing. These practices have been reported in many cultures on all continents from India to the Middle East, Australia to South America, Africa to Siberia; they are found in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and New Zealand. Laderman described the magical reproductive maneuvers of the Cuna Indians of Panama, originally made famous by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) in his analysis of a chant sung by a male Cuna shaman to a woman dangerously obstructed in birthing:

The laboring woman is sick because Mu, the power that forms the fetus, has captured her soul. The shaman must send his own soul into the spirit-world to wrest the sick woman's soul from Mu and her daughters. The battleground is neither in the sky nor in some invisible dimension, but within the pregnant woman's uterus, a world peopled with threatening animals and powerful spirits. Thus, in the Cuna song, the macrocosm has become the microcosm, the unseen universe is contained within a woman's genitals. (Laderman, 1983, p. 145)

However, according to Taussig, the shaman does not actually enter the woman's body or womb at all, but instead enters a mimetic copy, a spirit-double of her body (1993, p. 120). The shaman enters the womb of the woman's spirit-double to work on the copy, thereby affecting the human body (1993, p. 121). In fact, Taussig wrote that there is yet a further set of mimetics simultaneously operating in Cuna cosmology: that of the Great Mother and the woman's spirit body fused with her Earthly body. He cited Norman Macpherson Chapin that "during pregnancy a woman's soul or spirit body is one with the cosmos itself" (Taussig, 1993, p. 121). This also gives the impression of layered spirit worlds, and is reminiscent of the three bodies or sheaths (koshas) of Vedantic lore (causal body, subtle body, and gross body) sometimes described as onion rings (Wilber, 1998), or perhaps the Buddhist Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, and Nirmanakaya.

As Taussig put it, "the womb is of importance not merely for reproduction but also for the transformation of the level of reality that the chant evokes" (1993, p. 123). The womb, Taussig wrote, "is the switchboard of the male magician's reality-control apparatus" (1993, p. 123). The spiritual landscape alters suddenly and we find ourselves lost, he wrote, in a transgressive moment that creates "mimetic
slippage" through the "gates of repression of the secretly familiar, the origin of the world, the home of all homes, the (great) mother's genitals" (1993, p. 122), thereby precipitating a metamorphosis of reality (1993, p. 126).

The instability of consciousness, the "sudden alteration in the plane of reality of the referent occurs precisely at the moment of the evocation of the womb" (1993, p. 123). The womb can be seen as the gateway to transpersonal consciousness and alterity-scapes, which are in effect imaginal womb worlds, spirit simulacra, or luminous body cosmologies, heavens that are ontological realities in themselves.

**Buddha's Luminous Womb**

A similar and perhaps more familiar cultural motif of the male "spiritual midwife" doing business with a cosmic womb is found in Tibetan Buddhist Lamaism. Tibetan cosmology, because it specifically links its consciousness practices to the afterlife and reincarnation, has been a religious tradition of great interest to both transpersonal psychologists and near-death researchers (Bache, 2000; Carr, 1993; Grof, 1998).

According to the *Bardo Thodol* or the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz, 1960), meditation practice reaches its experiential zenith in the experience of the *Dharmakaya* (primary clear light) also known as *Tathagatagarbha*, which is translated variously as *Buddha Mind, Buddha Womb*, and *Buddha Embryo* (Gross, 1994, pp. 186–189), which can equate to the posthumous condition, even if achieved in life (Carr, 1993; Tambiah, 1970).

Bache, who has explored the perinatal relationship with NDEs in some experiential depth, wrote that "Vajrayana Buddhism provides us with a striking example of a spiritual tradition choosing metaphors of the womb to describe the inner textures of spiritual awakening" (2000, p. 293). He then asked the question:

Is calling enlightenment the “Buddha-womb” or the “womb of the mother consort” devoid of psychological significance? Doesn't the choice of these powerful images reflect the perception that a deep, natural (and nonreductionistic) connection exists between birth and spiritual awakening? (Bache, 2000, p. 294)

I think that it does, but it also strongly affirms our present investigation into the relationship between NDEs, shamanic crisis,
body cosmologies, and shamanistic midwifery. Here I will draw attention to some patterns in Cuna and Cantonese midwifery similar to those of Tibetan Lamaism, a hybrid of indigenous Bon shamanism and Indian Buddhism. As noted above, in many cultures, the shaman figure begins his or her career with an initiatory crisis. The shaman, having survived death by accident and initiation, has explored the demonic underworld realm and the sky-world and learned from the experience the cause and cure of illness. Demonic hosts set upon the Buddha himself just before his enlightenment, and this constitutive enactment is reiterated in ritual throughout the Buddhist world (Kapferer, 1989). Halifax observed that “shamanic motifs, such as dismemberment, being devoured by demons, supernatural ascents and flights” are commonly found in the practice of Tibetan Lamaism (1982, p. 37), and that shamanistic crises have a relationship to biological birth (1979, p. 75).

Indo-Tibetan cosmology comes fully laden with both intrauterine and death imagery. Indeed, some Tibetan texts (sGam.po.pa, 1971/12th century, pp. 63–66) elaborated in great detail the challenges of prenatal development and birth (Grof, 1998, p. 92; see also Gross, 1990, p. 83, for a feminist perspective). Charles Laughlin, a Buddhist monk for seven years, demonstrated how perinatal experience, related to shamanism and NDEs, can arise in Vajrayana practices:

It has not yet been generally recognized [that] the experience of the womb and birth scenes spontaneously arise during meditation, particularly when the meditation is carried out in an intense retreat situation. The author recalls once meditating on the breath (anapanasati) in a straight-backed chair when a tunnel arose in the visual field at the end of which was a light which grew brighter and more intense (accompanied by a flow of energy in his body). When the climax of the experience had passed, he found himself lying on the floor in a fetal position with arms and legs twitching and in a state of confusion. (Laughlin, 1990, p. 156)

In Tibetan cosmology, birth is located as one of the six intermediate states or bardos that exist after death and before rebirth (Evan-Wentz, 1960; but see Carr, 1993). The lama works magically to “midwife” the recently-deceased-but-now-incarnating person into a birth among benevolent parents. The deceased has entered the “door of the womb,” located in alterity, after being drawn toward his or her copulating parents, and thus has taken rebirth (Campbell, 1990, pp. 175–179; Evans-Wentz 1960).
Here again we see an interpenetrating amalgam of perinatal memory, shamanic crisis, and spirit-wombs. This may well suggest that the highly refined consciousness-expanding practices of Tibetan Buddhist Lamaism reflect yet another cultural expression of the psychic amalgam found in the Cantonese and Cuna examples, which condense perinatal traumata, shamanistic crisis, and the NDE into their sacred mind-worlds. Compare, for example, the similarities between the following statements, the first from Taussig's study of Cuna shamanism and the second from Anna Klein's study of the Great Bliss Queen in the Tibetan/Bonpo tradition:

The mother's vagina was transformed into a golden tunnel through which the genipa people would travel when called by the medicine men, and her breath became a golden wind to speed them on their canoes made from the lips of her vagina. (Taussig, 1993, p. 113)

The womb expresses the ultimate spiritual discovery. ... In Buddhist traditions, for example, the womb "expanse of reality" is a ubiquitous matrix, participating in and pervading all that is born from it. (Klein, 1995, p. 178)

In these transformed perspectives, the world is a luminous womb continuous with women's bodies. I have already shown how, in the Cuna Indian example, the woman's body is sheathed by several "Other" luminous spirit bodies, and in the Cantonese version the female uterus extends all the way to Paradise. In the Malay version, Paradise also extends to the womb. Shamans in all three examples, with some cultural variation, utilize nonordinary states of consciousness that suggest a system of midwifery that has compressed a woman's adult trauma (traumatic birth-giving and child mortality) with her own traumatic perinatal memories, and transpersonal spirit worlds into their culture-specific variations. Again, Grof's perinatal transpersonalism overlaps, in a similar way, all three levels and suggests that these "levels" coexist in a complex condition of interpenetration.

A Zygotic Alterity

At this juncture I would like to present my third story of a father and his brush with alterity. The following is from a narrative recounted by Kevin, a 25-year-old man of European descent. This event occurred soon after his child's conception, when he was 19 years old.
I gathered from the interview that he had sensitivity to spiritual phenomena. He said that he knew from what "people had said that a woman in labor can experience hallucinations, altered states, and spiritual emergencies," and he told me that he and his girlfriend had been experimenting with sexual yoga around the time of their becoming pregnant and that they had "experimented" with psychedelic substances in the past. He said he had the experience of his child "coming down" into his partner's body during sex. He referred to birth as "pure magic," but he was troubled by the "weirdness" of reproduction:

Interviewer: Were you aware of any kind of religious, spiritual, transcendental things around birth?
Kevin: Oh, yeah! I had lots of goings on inside of me that I did not know how to talk to Rosie about. I sort of felt like I was having my own pregnancy in a way; sort of whole changes happening inside of me, of how I would relate to the world, and having my own theories about what it means to have a child. [Long pause.] When Mali was a tiny fetus I had this vision that a new universe was being born.

Interviewer: Really? When she was really tiny; how beautiful.
Kevin: It screwed with my mind.

Interviewer: Were you "out of it" ["stoned"]?
Kevin: No.

Interviewer: Dreaming?
Kevin: No.

Interviewer: It was a vision?
Kevin: Yeah. I guess I felt like I knew that it must be a whole new universe. It was like I was walking around inside of her.

Interviewer: [Hesitantly] So ... the world had become Mali?
Kevin: Yeah. I was like inside Mali and everybody had become Mali. ... Then I had this really weird death experience. We had been working building and we were having a cigarette at the end of the day and some guy came up from next door and to me he was another version of my daughter and I freaked out and blacked out. I fainted. I thought I was dying. But I remember just before that happened the light of the sun changed slightly. It was like a hallucination; looking around,
everything was slightly different, people became super-imposed on their image, it wasn’t like a real image anymore, it changed slightly. Very unsettling. ... I did not know what was going on. [Laughs]. That threw me. ... After that I had a whole series of episodes around life, death, and birth. I eventually was hospitalized for psychosis. But it doesn’t really matter to me what others have said; that was the most sacred experience I have ever had.

In Kevin’s own words, a “whole new universe,” an idiosyncratic alterity-scape, was secretly born. With a trick of the light the geography of consciousness became unstable and he oscillated between worlds, as an imaginal world began to superimpose its image onto the “ordinary” one. Furthermore, he did not quite identify with the child in the womb, but entered the mother’s womb and his daughter’s fetal body. He was now sheathed within the body of the unborn, sheathed by the mother, where he sat pregnant with images. And suddenly the whole phenomenal world changed and became the body of his unborn child, in whose body he now wandered alongside other versions of his unborn daughter. A hatchling spiritual landscape had wobbled into imaginal existence, a “vision” catalyzed, in my informant’s words, by pregnancy.

Conclusion

Clearly these three fathers have experienced spiritual emergen-
cies with NDE, UFO, and shamanic properties. “Shamanism,” as a Western category, appears to be wed closely to NDEs. However, if we are going to compare the “deep structure” of shamanistic crisis with NDEs, then we should also consider “women’s business” in this regard. We must also explore shamanism and its functions against its wider cosmic, ritual, and gendered landscapes. Furthermore, bringing the culturally submerged transpersonal states of fatherhood and male procreativity into the picture as a category of transpersonal psychology and near-death research could have interesting implications for both disciplines. In particular, this research could contribute to the arena of transpersonal developmental schemas and the controversies between Grof and Ken Wilber or Michael Washburn and Wilber (Bache, 2000, pp. 287–294; Rothberg and Kelly, 1998). The untidy
amalgam of birth, sex, and death, and the interpenetrative nature of these phenomena, suggest remarkable similarities to Grof's observations (1985, 1998).

These men's stories have raised many questions, and call for more research and a further exploration of NDEs or NDE-like experiences generated around birthing. What is it that catalyzes this kind of experience in some fathers and not others? Are they environmentally mediated, or beyond culture – if there is such a thing? Can they be weighed in terms of intensity; and should they be? Are these experiences isolated events or are there more of them out there? Are they the first peel of the onion or the last? Are they a complete structure or part of a greater unfolding system? Are they "regressions" to archaic levels of the psyche, psychotic reactions, or healing events in the species mind (Bache, 2000)? Are these experiences shamanic near-death events or something else?

Questions aside, there is still, I would argue, an intriguing relationship between birth and death observed in Cuna, Tibetan, Cantonese, Malay, and Guatemalan spiritual midwifery practices that, in a fledgling way, some of my participants' experiences seemed to parallel, and this is significant. Perhaps in a more transpersonally sophisticated world, one with adequate cultural and linguistic niches to welcome, hold generously, and pile reflection and artistic rendition upon these moments, these experiences could be recognized as a form of "initiation." Such potentially dangerous but transformative NDE-like moments could, with the right exogenous support, be honed into a fruitful transpersonal practice, performed to garner spiritual strength and transpersonal authority to face the oncoming developments of birth. This idea is central to shamanism: that the near-death experience can become the psychospiritual locus from which a shaman begins his or her career.

These mystical experiences, as I have shown, are profoundly related to psychosocially-constructed origin mythologies; and the vast array of origin mythologies specifically relate birth and death to cosmic bodies such as Buddha's womb. If we are not researching the other side of life when we peer into the NDE, then we are perhaps researching the farthest reaches of consciousness: alterity-scapes and their socially imaged spaces. This research would suggest that the study of enlightenment-as-alterity and its deep but largely hidden relationship to birth-giving, perinatal traumas, ecstasies, NDEs, and shamanism calls at least for further inquiry.
References


BOOK REVIEW

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When I first attempted to write this review, shortly after the publication of Gracia Fay Ellwood's The Uttermost Deep, I found myself so overcome by the sheer sweep and substance of the book as to feel incapable of adequate (or even intelligible) response. Still struggling to resolve some of the issues raised by the material, I could not think what to say. Both she and the Journal's editor have suffered considerably for that, for which I offer this public regret. That this review and its readers have benefited by a lengthy sabbatical for reflection will, I hope, provide some consolation.

"If there is one thing that is self-evident about Near-Death Experiences," writes Gracia Fay Ellwood, "it is that the explanation for them is not self-evident" (p. 261). One hopes she was chuckling at the understatement as she wrote. This quote appears in the conclusion to her masterful book, The Uttermost Deep: The Challenge of Near-Death Experiences. She continues:

The common themes [of a broad variety of near-death experiences] cannot be dismissed, but neither can the cultural inconsistencies ...

The pattern remains a challenge; it strongly suggests survival without compelling one to believe it. (p. 261)

In the relatively brief space of 265 pages, Ellwood examines and
explores those things: the types, themes, patterns, and interpretive frameworks surrounding near-death experiences and how they may contribute to a coherent theory of survival, of life after death.

*The Uttermost Deep* may well be the broadest and most thorough discussion of near-death experiential components yet published anywhere. Examining not only the narrowly focused near-death experience (NDE) literature but scholarly and classical literature as well, Ellwood explores NDE parallels in world religions, a range of philosophical positions concerning them, and related accounts within the parapsychological literature, especially from the 19th century. As a piece of research, the work is stunning. As an overview of interpretations of near-death experiences, it is without parallel.

To begin with—as, indeed, appears in her Introduction—Ellwood is fearless and matter-of-fact, plunging immediately and without apology into acknowledging that certain aspects of NDE accounts appear to be paranormal and “violate some basic assumptions underlying the modern worldview” (p. 10). To readers who may be put off simply by the mention of materialistically suspect themes, I can only say, “Don’t quit yet.” To leave the book because of possibly uncomfortable ideas would be to miss a rich background of information simply not available in one place elsewhere. Rather than offering a defense of one position or the other, Ellwood sets out some basic principles of parapsychological investigation and promptly explores and defines her use of the terms “believer” and “skeptic.”

The author’s approach to near-death experiences is equally straightforward and no-nonsense; she gives us passionate interest, but not a sentimental line in the entire book. A concise and thorough summary of Raymond Moody’s *Life After Life* (1975) and *Reflections on Life After Life* (1977) opens the work, mercifully without a repetition of his by-now-over-familiar NDE description, “A man is dying...” By the end of a brisk four-page chapter, she has established her territory and noted the common conclusion of those early days—that “the peaceful and radiant NDE provided a picture of what life after death was like” (p. 19) — but adds, “However, as often happens, what at first seems to be a relatively clear and consistent matter turns out to be complex and untidy” (p. 19). For the next 144 pages, she works her way through the historical, philosophical, and research-based literature on the complexities and untidiness of NDEs and their relationship to the possible demonstrability of life after death.

The book includes a superb and most welcome look at what is known or conjectured about distressing experiences. (Ellwood refers to them,
accurately, as "painful"). Here again, she is nothing if not thorough, quoting the work of P.M.H. Atwater (1994), Barbara Rommer (2000), and the study by Bruce Greyson and myself (Greyson and Bush, 1992), among others, but not overlooking the early contributions of the Evergreen Study (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981), Margot Grey (1985), and the often-maligned Maurice Rawlings (1978). She also provides data from Robert Monroe (1971) and other writers on out-of-body experience (OBEs), as well as literature from pre-20th century religious and parapsychological realms to widen the horizon of frightening visionary experiences.

Beyond this amplitude of information, what makes the Ellwood contribution special is that she does not succumb to the emotional trap of trying to explain the experiences away ("It wasn't really that bad, now, was it?") nor to any presupposition that she knows why they occur. She is like a botanist - though I am also reminded of forensic pathologist Henry Lee - picking her way carefully through the evidence, overlooking nothing, taking it all in, seeing how the pieces fit together. Her willingness to tolerate ambiguity is refreshing:

[Some] explanations reflect the good news that many who have painful NDEs do in fact respond to them as to a much-needed wake-up call. But since radiant experiences also trigger spiritual awakenings, we have not yet pinpointed the reasons why some are painful. Besides, some persons have had painful and radiant experiences in quick succession with no noticeable change of heart between them, and occasionally experiences will begin with peace and happiness then become painful, or vice versa. (p. 95)

This is a welcome antidote to the many too-glib commentaries surrounding this topic.

Although Ellwood's focus in *The Uttermost Deep* is near-death experiences, the foundation of her interest is how much can be known about survival. This is why she looks so intently at the painful experiences, seeing in them "the most troubling moral ambiguity of all: the possibility that a good and spiritually aware person may plunge at death into a scene of meaninglessness or alien horror, as certain painful NDEs suggest may happen" (p. 219). Her sensitivity to this moral ambiguity is notable and perhaps unique in the literature.

Leading into the exploration of survival issues, Ellwood notes, "One reason people with very different positions about life after death have so much trouble communicating is that their different ways of thinking are not brought out into the open" (p. 146). So saying, she describes the "paradigmatic mind" as one bound by a rigid worldview;
the "data-led mind" that bases conclusions on evidence; and the "wishful-and-fearful-thinking mind" that bases decisions on feelings about an issue.

Observing that she is herself "a data-led thinker," Ellwood sets out to examine the topic of life after death. Of three chapters specifically about survival, the first two are a careful survey of philosophical approaches to mind/body questions and of the arguments for and against the probability of survival. It does seem possible that reading them in the context of the three models of thinking would be a particularly interesting exercise for anyone with a paradigmatic or wishful-and-fearful-thinking tendency, simply to observe the data-led approach in action.

Here - the "botanist" again - Ellwood holds up each position for the reader's inspection, pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of each, what it contributes to the whole, and, if it is to be discarded, why she thinks so. If only as an exercise in intelligent and fair-minded discussion, the chapter would be a treat; as an introduction to mind/body issues for any neophyte philosopher, it is a downright marvel.

The third survival chapter, "Documented Evidence for Survival," looks at "the records of psychical research [including] many studies of apparent communication with the deceased" (p. 172). She divides them into four categories, having to do with mediumship, apparitions, spirit influence in daily life, and reincarnation, and examines each with her usual thoroughness.

It seems to this reader that the material in this chapter, although abundant, may not have the same quality as, say, her discussion of philosophical positions about mind/body interactions or her commentary on interpretations. Despite that, and whatever one's view of the well-documented attempts to capture the butterflies of psychic experience, Ellwood's material provides a concise, balanced, and informative introduction to the field of psychic research and experience account.

The final section of *The Uttermost Deep*, "Interpretive Frameworks," would all by itself be worth the price of the book. "Anyone who has something to say about the subject of life after death is interpreting - interpreting ideas, images, experiences, and/or evidence," writes Ellwood (p. 208). Brava! By now the reader knows already there will be no shoot-from-the-hip conclusions in this work, but it is nonetheless a pleasure (at least to another data-led mind) to see this stated so clearly.

That said, Ellwood looks carefully at three types of interpretive
framework from which people have commented about survival. They include the agnostic; multi-world; and one-world (three varieties, described below). The agnostic framework, represented by John Wren-Lewis (1992) and Carol Zaleski (1987), "is an approach in which the issues of one world or many, survival or extinction, are left open; we do not know. Some hold that we can never know" (p. 208). Because by definition this framework contributes nothing to the exploration of survival, Ellwood describes the Wren-Lewis and Zaleski positions but carries them no farther.

Multi-world frameworks (Egyptian, Sumerian, Christian fundamentalist, folk Buddhist) maintain "hard boundaries, so to speak, between our public physical world and the world or worlds of the afterlife. The gates are controlled by supernatural beings or forces that human minds cannot probe or understand; we can only obey, accept, or try to appease" (p. 208).

By a one-world framework Ellwood means "a view of the universe as capable of being explored extensively by human minds and means [and in which] things are related to other things in more or less regular ways of cause and effect" (p. 208). Although materialism is a one-world framework, it denies the possibility of survival and is left, with Wren-Lewis and Zaleski, outside the remainder of her discussion. Other one-world views "are much more promising" as avenues of exploration (p. 218).

One-world frameworks that affirm the possibility of life after death may be gradualistic, the assumption, as in Theosophy and Spiritualism "that the kind of consciousness developed in physical life continues and develops in afterlife experience" (p. 218); projectionist, the assumption, as in Tibetan Buddhism and in Kenneth Ring's Heading Toward Omega (1984), that the mind projects its images so they appear to have an independent reality; or initiatory.

The several initiatory interpretations display forms of a metanarrative "in which the central event or events are painful experiences out of which develop joy and transformation ... examples of a cosmic pattern of initiation that is necessary to ultimate fulfillment" (p. 229). The pattern is central as the hero's journey in Joseph Campbell (1949) and Northrop Frye (1975), also Michael Grosso (1985), Stanislav Grof (1985), and the Western mystical path. It may, to some extent, overlap the projectionist view.

What this review misses capturing, for lack of space, is a remarkable texture, for lack of a better term, in the Ellwood presentation. For example, a good many writers on near-death experiences have
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mentioned the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Faulker and Goulet, 1994/16th century BC). Ellwood not only mentions it, she notes its proper title—the *Book of Going Forth by Day*—describes its cultural background, explores commonalities with modern NDEs and wonders about their sources, referring easily to similar New Testament themes. The section is a small jewel of clarity. She does the same with Sumerian afterlife conceptions, and with Buddhist—Indian, Chinese, Pure Land, and Tibetan—and she does it all lucidly, readably, and in fewer than 20 pages.

Throughout, her writing displays this deftness. In fact, following her agility through so much information from so many areas—the field botanist/philosopher/literary critic/historian leading the amateur—can be a challenge. It is helpful that the book includes 19 pages of notes/bibliography and a detailed index.

Ellwood draws no categorical conclusions, makes no sweeping declarations. What she does is explore with us the territory of near-death experiences and their relationship to the question of life after death, especially as concerns painful NDEs and their implications. Where she takes us is here, in the conclusion of the book, in her comparison of the projectionist and initiatory interpretive frameworks:

In the full projectionist position only the Ultimate, the Light, is really real; to find salvation from suffering and evil is to penetrate the illusion of separateness, and to realize for oneself that the Oneness (or the Light/Void) is all there is ....

... Thus to the NDEr enduring tormenting beings or chaos or cosmic loneliness, and to the story's anxious listener, the projectionist response is: When you see with clear consciousness, there is nothing to fear; the situation isn't real; you are already "home."

For some whose approaches are essentially gradualist or initiatory, however, the NDEr, the journey and some or all of the beings encountered along the way are real .... [E]ssentially, conscious beings are more than projections; they have an existence in their own right. They may be aware of their Creator/Source, or may be ignorant or partially asleep. Their decisions make a difference; they can become evil, can do harm to others and themselves. They can suffer terribly; they can help and heal. But there is a cosmic pattern to which they belong, a .... story with a happy ending. From these perspectives the response to evil and to the prospect of cosmic pain is: With your eyes on the prize, control your fear, choose to love; you will be "home" in the morning. (pp. 264–265)

To read *The Uttermost Deep* is to encounter a book of remarkable yet accessible scholarship, moral principle, and intelligence. It is a
book to highlight and go back to. Whether we can claim survival may be up to each of us to decide; Ellwood's venture leads to a high place from which we can at least see clearly where we are.

References


BOOK REVIEW

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The words psychology and psychiatry mean respectively science and medicine of mind. So the study of the mind-body relationship, the source of consciousness and whether it survives bodily death, could be one of psychology's and psychiatry's greatest enterprises. Unfortunately, these scientific disciplines have understudied these topics. Usually, even considering the possibility of a source of consciousness outside the brain or its survival after death is considered heretical and raises doubts about one's scientific credibility. However, the question of whether the personality survives after death is one of the most important ones a scientist can pose.

Since ancient times, most religions and philosophies have tried to solve, or at least to discuss, that subject. In the last 150 years many scientists and scholars have tried using scientific tools to answer this burning question (Alvarado, 2003). Studies in these fields developed by some of the most important names in psychology and medicine, such as William James, Hans Eysenck, Carl Jung, and Charles Richet,
were not enough to overcome the prejudice, and usually these investigations remained largely unknown by contemporary scientists.

Therefore, it is particularly admirable that a highly competent scientist and psychologist like David Lester has decided to write an entire book to examine the empirical evidence bearing on the old question: Does life after death really exist? Have scientists produced any evidence for or against it? Lester has a doctorate in psychology and another in social sciences, and has spent decades working on suicide prevention. A Professor of Psychology at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey since 1971, he has published dozens of books and hundreds of scholarly articles on death and dying. Lester assumes a skeptical, but humble and respectful, stance toward the studies and scientists who considered the survival hypothesis. This posture is both a scientific and admirable one, but rare among skeptics.

This readable book presents a vast bibliography and describes the results of the studies reviewed in an objective and fair way. The book is divided into five parts: (1) "Views on Life After Death," presenting some religious views and the profile of believers; (2) "Near-Death Experiences," a comprehensive review of the near-death experience (NDE), which comprises one-third of the book; (3) "Reincarnation"; (4) "Other Phenomena," including apparitions of the dead, hallucinations in widowhood, deathbed visions, possession, mediums, and poltergeists; and (5) "Conclusions."

The last page of this book concludes that "the research reviewed in this book fails to be convincing that there is life after death" (p. 214). However, some selection biases and epistemological theses present in the book weaken this conclusion's generalization. I will present a brief discussion about these two shortcomings, because they are very prevalent but remain usually unrecognized in discussions about survival research.

First, regarding selection bias, a comprehensive and unbiased search for studies is essential in any review work. A selection bias occurs when there is a systematic error in how studies are selected for inclusion (Cochrane Collaboration, 2001). Lester writes that his review was restricted to studies published in "reputable scholarly journals" (p. 6) in "the last thirty years. If the phenomena exist, there must be recent examples" (p. 4). The reasons given for narrowing the time range covered were that the earlier researchers "were not skilled in designing tests for the validity of the cases or in ruling out fraud" (p. 4), and "The investigators at the time were believers, and they made no effort to rule out fraud" (p. 198).

The major problem in using only recent studies, however, is that
the most fruitful period of the survival research was before 30 years ago, so most studies relevant to the subject are excluded. Excluded are not only the best and the most interesting studies performed by the Societies for Psychical Research (British and American branch, which carried out the largest scientific effort ever done to investigate the survival after death), but also many classic studies from the non-English speaking world, such as those conducted by Ernesto Bozzano, Alexander Aksakof, Cesare Lombroso, Gabriel Delane, and Charles Richet.

With few exceptions and for several reasons, survival research declined sharply after the 1930s. Dismissing hundreds of studies based on their age, without evaluating their quality separately, is questionable, considering that some eminent scientists regarded some of these old studies as high in quality. For instance, Eysenck, considered by some as one of the most influential psychologists of the last century, the man who made the study of personality a rigorous science, and the founder of a science-based clinical psychology (Farley, 2000), stated that the evidence available regarding the survival question (including the old studies) "is capable of scientific consideration and is of very high quality" (Eysenck and Sargent, 1993, p. 151).

Stating that the old investigators were believers who did not have good research skills and made no effort to rule out fraud is also questionable. First, the Societies for Psychical Research have never held any corporate views and never reached any official position regarding the survival question. Many of their researchers were not believers and some of them were skeptics in the beginning and changed their minds during the studies, such as William Crookes, Lombroso, Richard Hodgson, and Frederic Myers. These early studies of quality also tried to rule out fraud. Hodgson was considered an expert in unmasking fraud; his strength was hostile and aggressive debunking. In studying the medium Leonora Piper, he introduced sitters anonymously or pseudonymously, used proxy sitters, made complete word-for-word records of séances, and took signed testimony from the participants. Hodgson even hired detectives to follow Piper. Society for Psychical Research investigators also took her to England, where she knew no one and was kept under strict surveillance and had her baggage checked (Eysenck and Sargent, 1993; Gauld, 1982).

In selecting only published studies, mainly in controversial areas, one is subject to another kind of selection bias: publication bias, in which the publication of research depends on the nature and direction of the study results. In good systematic reviews it is a standard procedure to look for unpublished studies, because they may have
different results from the published ones (Cochrane Collaborators, 2001). Because the mainstream scientific journals and even the parapsychological publications in some degree have been quite hostile to the survival hypothesis, we can reasonably expect that they will tend to avoid publishing papers on this subject and/or have a bias toward the publication of negative reports.

Stating that "if the phenomena exist, there must be recent examples" (p. 4) is also problematic. There are many contemporary examples of the experiences discussed in the book; however, today there may not be enough scientists interested in, and with the time and support to investigate, these phenomena. As the survival hypothesis is outside the currently accepted scientific paradigm, the large majority of mainstream scientists simply do not note these examples. It is usually very hard for someone to perceive something outside his or her accepted paradigm. As Thomas Kuhn asked:

Can it conceivably be an accident, for example, that Western astronomers first saw change in the previously immutable heavens during the half-century after Copernicus' new paradigm was proposed? The Chinese, whose cosmological beliefs did not preclude celestial change, had recorded the appearance of many new stars in the heaven at a much earlier date. (Kuhn, 1970, p. 116)

Probably because of the selection criteria adopted and the particular interest of the author, the experience discussed most thoroughly in the book was the NDE. In spite of NDEs being in recent years the most studied of the experiences included in this book, they are usually considered the least evidential ones regarding the survival question. Also lacking are three of the most recent and important review books on life after death, written by Robert Almeder (1992), Stephen Braude (2003), and Alan Gauld (1982). In summary, these selection biases may strongly influence the conclusions because they lead to the rejection of the large majority of the empirical evidence available and to focus on less evidential studies.

Second, regarding epistemological posture, it is also frequent in this field to assume certain epistemological theses that are unwarranted and not defensible according to the contemporary philosophy of science. The first assumption is that old studies are not reliable. If we rejected all experiments in physics and biology performed before 1975, almost all foundations of these sciences would be removed. The history of science contains plenty of examples of good studies that were at first ignored but later rediscovered and valued many years later. Gregor Mendel, the "father of modern genetics," presented his seminal
paper in 1865, but it was ignored or dismissed at that time, and only in 1900 did Mendel's work receive the recognition it deserved.

The second assumption is the dismissal of qualitative data and the overemphasis on statistical analysis and quantitative data: "Convincing research that can be reproduced requires large samples of subjects, accurate measurements, and statistical analysis of the data" (p. 92). While I do not deny the crucial importance of quantitative research, the evidence for life after death provided by mediumship, NDEs, or reincarnation-type cases are usually qualitative in nature. One of the most important contemporary scientific paradigms, natural selection, emerged from qualitative studies performed by Charles Darwin. According to Alan Chalmers, people holding the idea that "if you cannot measure, your knowledge is meagre and unsatisfactory" fail to "realize that the method that they endeavor to follow is not only necessarily barren and unfruitful but also is not the method to which the success of physics is to be attributed" (Chalmers, 1978, p. xiv).

Many researchers seem to wait for the "crucial experiment," the definitive proof beyond any doubt that could not be explained in any other way. However, such definitive proof does not exist in any science (Chalmers, 1978; Popper, 1963). Most scientific experimental results can be explained in more than one way. It is not reasonable to dismiss studies and evidence because they are not perfect. In any science, the best we can do is to accumulate good, but not perfect, evidence in favor of some hypothesis and to test whether this hypothesis can resist falsification. Following Karl Popper (1963), the question of survival could be put in a different way: Is there evidence that falsifies the hypothesis that consciousness is generated by the brain and disappears with physical death?

There is also a trend to minimize the importance of studies conducted by investigators who are open to the survival hypothesis: "Unless researchers into these phenomena get skeptics ... to participate in their research design, they are not going to convince skeptics that the phenomena are real" (p. 204).

Chalmers regarded as inappropriate the focus on the beliefs of individuals for understanding science:

We are barely in a position to know much about the degree of belief a scientist has in the theory on which he or she works, nor do we need to know if we are concerned to characterize and evaluate the scientific character of that work ....

My characterization and evaluation .... stand or fall on consid-
erations of claims made, arguments offered and experiments performed rather than on considerations concerning the beliefs of the scientists involved. (Chalmers, 1990, p. 89)

Furthermore, convincing all skeptics may not be a feasible task. The history of science has shown that scientific revolutions did not triumph because the new paradigm was able to convert all skeptics and leaders of the opposition. Many skeptics were not persuaded even after taking a look through Galileo's telescope or Louis Pasteur's microscope:

The transfer of allegiance from paradigm to paradigm is a conversion experience that cannot be forced. Lifelong resistance, particularly from those whose productive careers have committed them to an older tradition of normal science, is ... an index to the nature of scientific research itself. The source of resistance is the assurance that the older paradigm will ultimately solve all its problems ....

... [A] generation is sometimes required to effect the change ... Though some scientists, particularly the older and more experienced ones, may resist indefinitely, most of them can be reached in one way or another. Conversions will occur a few at a time until, after the last holdouts have died, the whole profession will again be practicing under a single, but now a different, paradigm. (Kuhn, 1970, pp. 151-152)

Finally, I propose two more general considerations. The importance of fraud is often overemphasized, as is the importance of transcultural differences. Even when the investigators assessed fraud in a meticulous manner and there was no reason to suppose it, fraud is still considered as a possible explanation: "The existence of fraud in some cases, of course, raises doubts about all cases .... Perhaps the cover up is better in these apparently authentic cases" (p. 108). This is an unfalsifiable assertion and there are no fields of human activity that have not seen several examples of fraud. Last year, Science, one of the world's most prestigious scientific journals, published stem cell research that was later unmasked as fraudulent (Kennedy, 2006). Skeptical organizations also have been the target of several claims of unscientific procedures (Keen, 2003; Leiter, 2002). It does not follow that we should raise doubts about all scientific reports. Of course we need to keep in mind this possibility, but, as Eysenck and Carl Sargent wrote about parapsychological research:

we are faced with an abundance and quality of testimony which cannot be ignored. At some point we have to trust human testimony. After all, even scientific reports are the output of recording devices (of whatever kind) as viewed by human eyes. (Eysenck and Sargent, 1993, p. 28)
Second, there is an assumption that if the phenomena are real they cannot have transcultural variations: "If near-death experiences are evidence for life after death, they should be the same in every culture" (p. 96); and "If reincarnation really occurs, then there should be no cultural variations at all" (p. 153). If we adopt these criteria in psychiatry, there would be no "real" mental disorders, because all of them have a large transcultural variation in their manifestation and even in their clinical course. Any human experience will be perceived and reported differently among different cultures.

Three of the most relevant phenomena presented in this book are NDEs, reincarnation, and mediumship. The most substantial part of the book discusses NDEs, and contains a comprehensive review that embraces the most relevant studies. There is a good description of NDEs and of explanations that have been proposed in the literature. Unfortunately, it does not include two recent review papers precisely on the relevance of NDEs to survival and to the understanding of consciousness, published by some of the most important authors in the field: Sam Parnia and Peter Fenwick (2002) and Pim van Lommel (2004). Both papers argue against the brain-mind identity hypothesis. The book also ignores Michael Sabom's report of an NDE with verified observations occurring during a brain surgery and with a flat electroencephalogram (EEG) (Sabom, 1998).

One of the most important and burning questions about NDEs received only one mention in a short paragraph (p. 95): namely, how patients could be clearly conscious and aware of their surroundings during a cardiac arrest while their brains were not functional due to anoxia.

Even though Lester recognizes the high quality of the prospective studies on NDEs (Greyson, 2003; Parnia, 2001; van Lommel, 2001), there is little discussion about some of the principal conclusions of these authors:

Our results show that medical factors cannot account for occurrence of NDE .... Psychological factors are unlikely to be important as fear was not associated with NDE ....

... It is remarkable that people could recall their NDE almost exactly after 2 and 8 years. (van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, and Elfferich, 2001, p. 2043)

These findings did not provide any support for physiological models of the etiology of near-death experiences. (Greyson, 2003, p. 274)
There appeared to be no differences on all physiological measured parameters apart from partial pressure of oxygen during the arrest which was higher in the NDE group. (Parnia, Waller, Yeates, and Fenwick, 2001, p. 149)

Lester offers an in-depth criticism of excessively speculative physiological and psychological explanations for NDE. He also proposes several useful guidelines for future good studies in NDE: use of reliable and valid measurements before and just after the NDE; interviews of consecutive or randomly selected patients who have had NDEs in some hospital setting; use of large samples, including a control group and comparison of the elements reported using sound statistical techniques; uniform samples, from one type of source; avoidance of leading questions; and medical experts assessing the closeness to death. All these proposed guidelines were fulfilled by the three prospective studies described above. It is worth noting that these three rigorous studies were performed by different research groups in different countries and found similar results: around 10 percent incidence of NDEs among cardiac arrest patients, and no or little influence of medication or sociodemographic or psychophysiological variables.

The reincarnation section is the second largest of the book and provides a good overview on cases of children who claim to remember previous lives. However, birthmarks and birth defects, considered by some to be the best evidence for survival, receives only 9 lines in the book (p. 119). Ian Stevenson’s latest and most comprehensive work (Stevenson, 1997), containing 2080 pages with detailed studies of more than 230 cases on birthmarks and birth defects from around the world, is not listed in the references. All these cases are dismissed stating that “the presence of the birthmark may have influenced the story the child told of previous incarnation” (p. 119). Undoubtedly, birthmarks may foster fantasies in children’s minds about their origin; however, fantasies do not explain the many verifiable statements the children make, the unlearned skills they demonstrate, or the correspondence of birthmarks and birth defects with autopsy records.

In analyzing the cases of xenoglossy, the author writes that the evidence is not convincing because the subjects made occasional grammatical mistakes, mispronounced some words, and did not show a vocabulary of thousands of words in the foreign language. In other words, he would consider a case of xenoglossy to be convincing only if the subject exhibited a complete and perfect fluency in a language without having been previously exposed to it. This is a respectable option. However, it is also a plausible hypothesis that the process of
reincarnation into another body could impair the skill of speaking a language in the same way that it impairs the memories.

Even if one does not consider it as a xenoglossy case, how can one explain a subject with no previous contact with Swedish having passed twice a polygraph test involving questions about whether she had had any previous contact with any Scandinavian language, indicating that she was telling the truth; having a very low score at the Modern Language Aptitude Test indicating that she would have to work hard to acquire command of the language; six native-born Swedish speakers, including a professor of Swedish, testifying to the occurrence of responsive xenoglossy; words pronounced with a Scandinavian and not an American accent; and 60 words introduced into conversation first by the subject, not previously used by interviewers, excluding doubtful words and English cognates (Stevenson, 1974)? Besides some general criticism about the poor quality of studies, this book does not provide a convincing alternative explanation of the most evidential and well conducted reports.

Unfortunately, only six pages are dedicated to mediumship, one of the most, if not the most, relevant experiences to the survival question. Only a few mediumistic cases are reported, most from the investigators Stevenson and Erlendur Haraldsson, who are categorized as not being “sophisticated researchers who know how to detect fraud and verify information accurately” (p. 200).

Some of the best recent investigations on mediumship were not included in the book. These studies adopted some important methodological safeguards that Lester also proposed, such as recording the statements during the sessions, use of controls, and statistical tests. Gary Schwartz (2002) has published several controlled studies to assess the accuracy and replicability of mediumistic communication. Archie Roy and Tricia Robertson (2001) have conducted studies that tested and disproved the skeptical hypothesis that the statements mediums make to recipients are so general as to be accepted by nonrecipients.

In spite of the limitations discussed above, this book is a good review of NDEs and reincarnation. Lester deserves our esteem for keeping a respectful approach toward investigators with whom he disagrees. His book is a good opportunity to raise the crucial debate about the mind-body and the survival questions, as well as to stimulate us to start in-depth studies in these highly exciting and controversial fields.
References


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