

The Near-Death Experience of a Culture

To the Editor:

Readers of this Journal are all quite familiar with the concept of the *near-death experience (NDE) of an individual*, which has been so eloquently developed by Raymond Moody, Kenneth Ring, Michael Sabom, and others. In *Heading Toward Omega*, Ring (1984) expanded the concept of the NDE of an individual to considering the *near-death experience of the planet*, drawing on the works of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Peter Russell, John White, and others.

To be sure, Ring applied his own original NDE research to this concept, and as far as I know, he was the first to articulate clearly the thesis of a planetary NDE. Michael Grosso's work, *The Final Choice* (1985), gave support to Ring's proposition. With that as a preface, let me now switch to applying the concept of the NDE to another level.

I live and work in Montana, a state with a relatively large Native American population. When first coming to Montana State University in 1975, not being Native American myself but having Native American students in my classes, I decided I needed to know more about the history of peoples native to the continental United States. I immersed myself in the writings of Dee Brown, Mari Sandoz, John Neihardt, and others.

This academic quarter (Fall 1989) I am giving my undergraduate near-death experience course for the second consecutive year. In discussing class projects with one of my students, I hit upon the idea of the *NDE of a culture*. It occurred to me that, based on my knowledge of Native American history and based on my experience living in Montana for the past 14 years, at least some of the Native American groups have undergone something akin to an NDE.

These groups were brought to the brink of extinction (some beyond) and, in a sense, left for dead by the United States Government of the late 1800s and early 1900s. It was not unlike a clinical cultural near-death, with the "heartbeat" of the tribe stopping and the "breathing" of the group coming to a halt.

As the resuscitation process has taken place over the last several decades, it would seem that some groups may have had what some would describe as a negative NDE. These groups have high rates of alcoholism, the fetal alcohol syndrome, physical violence, and unemployment. Other groups may be having the more typical positive, transcendental "core" experience in which there is a revival of tribal autonomy, a resurrection of the Native language, and a restored and keen interest in returning to the "old ways."

Therefore, it seems possible to me to speak not only in terms of an individual's NDE or the NDE of the Earth, but also in terms of a culture's NDE. We could look to other cultures and other times for additional examples of cultural NDEs, such as the Jewish people of World War II Europe.

As I ponder the idea of a cultural NDE, I can't help but wonder whether the mainstream American culture is presently undergoing its own NDE. Where are we with respect to Ring's five-stage model and its concomitant positive aftereffects? Or is it more the case that the American culture is in the throes of what some would call a negative NDE?

References

- Grosso, M. (1985). *The final choice: Playing the survival game*. Walpole, NH: Stillpoint Press.
- Ring, K. (1984). *Heading toward omega: In search of the meaning of the near-death experience*. New York, NY: William Morrow.

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