Editors’ Foreword

This composite edition of the Journal includes a special issue of proceedings from the second annual conference of the American Center for the Integration of Spiritually Transformative Experiences (ACISTE; pronounced “assist”) as well as one regular JNDS book review. The special issue section of the 2013 conference proceedings is divided into two parts. The first part contains two articles, and the second part contains five extended abstracts—providing more detail than a typical abstract but less than even a Brief Report.

The relevance of ACISTE’s work to that of the International Association for Near-Death Studies and this, its Journal, is that near-death experiences (NDEs) may be considered one specific type of STE—and STEs also include experiences related or similar to NDEs. In some circles, STEs are termed alternatively as, for example, exceptional human experiences, peak experiences, or mystical experiences. Thus, much material about STEs is also relevant to NDEs.

Preparation of the special issue section involved a unique review process. Because the ACISTE presentations had been selected through peer review, only we two editors reviewed and edited the article and the extended abstract manuscripts. The special issue section also involves a somewhat unique focus. Because ACISTE’s mission emphasis is on preparing professionals and paraprofessionals to assist people in their STE integration processes, the conference proceedings do not always reflect the Journal’s typically strict scholarly criteria but rather take a decidedly more clinical slant meant to provide readers with a broad base of understanding about psychotherapeutic and spiritual responses to STEs.

In the first article, “Differentiating Spiritual and Psychotic Experiences: Sometimes a Cigar Is Just a Cigar,” former long-time editor of this Journal, Bruce Greyson, M.D., compares hallucinations and STEs. He focuses primarily on differences, including context of, phenomenological characteristics of, recall of, and personal transformation following both types of experience. Greyson creates a strong case that, due to these differences, it is inappropriate as a default for healthcare providers to dismiss STEs as hallucinations.

Next in the first section is an article by David Hufford, Ph.D.: “The
Healing Power of Extraordinary Spiritual Experiences.” Hufford presents ethnographic accounts of what he terms extraordinary spiritual experiences (ESEs) and the positive impact they can have on individuals’ lives. Hufford’s ESEs are similar to what, within ACISTE, are called STEs, and he differentiates ESEs from ‘ordinary’ spiritual experiences (OSEs): Whereas ESEs involve apparent direct experience of a spiritual realm or reality, OSEs are experiences that people interpret spiritually based on their prior religious enculturation and training. Hufford continues with an in-depth review of the definitions of spirituality as well as various types of death-related ESEs and their typically healing impact on people who have or witness them.

The second section of the special issue begins with an extended abstract by Kim Jeska, Ph.D. In “After-Death Communication: Parents’ and Their Children’s Understanding and Meaning-Making,” Jeska presents the main findings from her dissertation research. She conducted a qualitative study of U.S. families of children who had experienced after-death communication (ADC) and found implications not only for the children and their parents but also for the communities and society to which the families belong.

Next, in her extended abstract, “Assisted After-Death Communications: A Self-Prescribed Treatment for Grief,” Julie Beischel, Ph.D., discusses the prevalence of ADCs and the practice among the bereaved of going to a medium in order to reconnect with the deceased loved one. Beischel continues by describing research that has been conducted on that practice and concludes by discussing its potential for the bereaved to heal their grief.

Linda Smith, J.D., Ph.D., M.A., PC, in her extended abstract, “Dying, Death, and Near-Death Phenomena: Validations from the Quantum World,” focuses on death-related STEs and asserts that quantum physics challenges outdated notions of materialist perspectives regarding the survival of consciousness after physical death. Smith explores quantum theory and reaffirms that scientists across many traditions are still discovering the full implications of such theories.

In “Spiritual Emergency in Christian Women: An Integral Study,” Peggy Lesnievicz, Ph.D., LPCC-S, describes her dissertation research wherein she explored Christian women’s STEs and, specifically, spiritual emergency. Lesnievicz found that the Christian women in her study were practicing a wide range of spiritual practices, from traditional to decidedly alternative, and that they believed their transformational processes were directed by God.

In the final extended abstract, “Compassionate Care and Feeding
of Spiritually Transformative Experiences in Brazil: A 130-Year-Old Tradition," Emma Bragdon, Ph.D., presents her ongoing engagement with the spiritual and healing traditions within Brazil. In particular, Bragdon describes the Spiritist Centers and Spiritist Psychiatric Hospitals in which personnel utilize an integrative approach and bring to patients evidence-based spiritual treatments to nurture spiritual evolution. Furthermore, Bragdon asserts that Brazilian Spiritist Centers provide mental healthcare workers from other cultures an ideal “model of effective integrative mental health care.”

This edition closes with a review by Robert Perry, B.A., of Episcopal priest John W. Price’s 2013 book, Revealing Heaven: The Eyewitness Accounts that Changed How a Pastor Thinks About the Afterlife. Perry summarizes how Price has transformed his Christian doctrine based on “the sheer power of NDE stories.” For Perry, that transformed doctrine contradicts some fundamental tenets of Christianity as most Christians conceptualize them. Although Price did not fully address these contradictions to Perry’s satisfaction, Perry ends his review by speculating on possible directions Christianity might take in light of what NDEs reveal, including the possibility that Price’s perspective may represent the early inklings of another Christian reformation.

Regarding both the special issue section of this edition of the Journal and its concluding book review, our hope is twofold. Readers new to the topic of STEs will hopefully begin to learn the research-related spiritual and therapeutic issues pertinent to this field of study and practice. Readers already knowledgeable about STEs, including NDEs, will hopefully gain an expanded awareness of ongoing developments in the field.

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