

*Journal*  
*of*  
Near-Death Studies

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**On the Mind/Body Problem: The Theory of Essence** • *J. Kenneth Arnette, Ph.D.*

**Similarities Between Near-Death Experiences and Multiple Personality Disorder** • *William J. Serdahely, Ph.D.*

**Near-Death Experiences Among Survivors of the 1976 Tangshan Earthquake** • *Feng Zhi-ying and Liu Jian-xun*

**Angels in Near-Death Experiences** • *Craig R. Lundhal, Ph.D.*

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**Volume 11, Number 1, Fall 1992**



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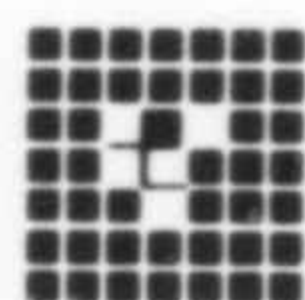
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**JOURNAL OF NEAR-DEATH STUDIES** (formerly ANABIOSIS) is sponsored by the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS). The Journal publishes articles on near-death experiences and on the empirical effects and theoretical implications of such events, and on such related phenomena as out-of-body experiences, deathbed visions, the experiences of dying persons, comparable experiences occurring under other circumstances, and the implications of such phenomena for our understanding of human consciousness and its relation to the life and death processes. The Journal is committed to an unbiased exploration of these issues, and specifically welcomes a variety of theoretical perspectives and interpretations that are grounded in empirical observation or research.

The **INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR NEAR-DEATH STUDIES** (IANDS) is a world-wide organization of scientists, scholars, near-death experiencers, and the general public, dedicated to the exploration of near-death experiences (NDEs) and their implications. Incorporated as a nonprofit educational and research organization in 1981, IANDS' objectives are to encourage and support research into NDEs and related phenomena; to disseminate knowledge concerning NDEs and their implications; to further the utilization of near-death research by health care and counseling professionals; to form local chapters of near-death experiencers and interested others; to sponsor symposia and conferences on NDEs and related phenomena; and to maintain a library and archives of near-death-related material. Friends of IANDS chapters are affiliated support groups in many cities for NDErs and their families and for health care and counseling professionals to network locally. Information about membership in IANDS can be obtained by writing to IANDS, 638 Prospect Avenue, Hartford, CT 06105-4298.

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## Editor's Foreword

In this issue's lead article, Kenneth Arnette, who has a doctorate in chemistry and is currently pursuing a second one in counseling psychology, outlines an innovative approach to the perennial mind/body problem. Arnette applies to near-death experiences (NDEs), and particularly to accounts of a tunnel between this world and the next, insights from theoretical cosmology, and particularly relativity theory. His "theory of essence" not only bridges the conceptual gap between psychospiritual phenomenology and the hard sciences, but more importantly suggests a rigorous framework, testable hypotheses, and a scientific methodology for the objective exploration of NDEs.

In another conceptual article, health scientist William Serdahely documents the parallels in antecedents and phenomenology between near-death experiences and multiple personality disorder (MPD). While others have likened the "Inner Self Helper" in MPD to entities encountered in the NDE (see letters to the editor by Dan Punzak and Susan Litton in the Spring and Summer 1990 issues), Serdahely broadens the comparison to other aspects of these two phenomena and argues that NDEs and MPD are so similar as to be variants of the same basic pattern.

We also include in this issue of the Journal two empirical studies. Psychiatrists Feng Zhi-ying and Liu Jian-xun report a survey of near-death experiences among survivors of a massive earthquake. Their study, the first English-language publication addressing modern Chinese NDEs, cautiously suggests crosscultural differences in near-death phenomena. In a retrospective study of the literature, sociologist Craig Lundahl reviews and analyzes the presence and functional roles of beings identified as angels in NDEs.

This issue's book review is counselor educator Janice Miner Holden's critique of *Many Lives, Many Masters*, in which psychiatrist Brian Weiss describes his work with a patient that led to her memories of past lives and past deaths, with interesting parallels to NDEs' accounts. We conclude this issue with three letters to the editor: Swedenborgian Leon Rhodes responds to sociologist Allan Kellehear's article

on NDEs and the pursuit of the ideal society from our Winter 1991 issue; NDEr Vincent Luciani responds to psychologist Kenneth Ring's "last word" on NDEs from the Fall 1991 issue; and psychiatric nurse Deborah Drumm provides a personal account of the beneficial effect of near-death literature on coping with potentially fatal illness.

Bruce Greyson, M.D.

# On the Mind/Body Problem: The Theory of Essence

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**ABSTRACT:** The classical mind/body problem can be approached empirically, using instances of the near-death experience (NDE) as experimental data. The monistic viewpoint, that the mind is the functioning of the brain, finds little support in the NDE data, while dualism, mind and body as separate entities, is consistent with NDE research to date. Comparison of the details of the NDE with predictions from theoretical cosmology shows strong similarities between the two and further strengthens the case for dualism. A theory of human nature is proposed that incorporates these similarities.

The mind/body problem has been a topic of great interest to philosophers, scientists, and psychologists throughout history. From the speculations of Plato, Aristotle, and other Greek philosophers to the dualist viewpoint of Descartes to modern psychology's material monist bent, the mind/body relationship has helped form the foundations of paradigms related to the understanding of human nature.

There are two fundamental positions one might reasonably take on the physical relationship between mind and body. I will call these the monist and dualist positions. The monist position is stated most economically as: the mind is nothing more than the biological functioning of the brain. Consider an analogy with computers. The monist might say that the brain corresponds to the central processing unit (CPU) of the computer, while the body and its organ systems are analogous to the peripherals in a computer system. The CPU serves to supervise

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and direct the functions of the system. It takes input from the environment via the keyboard and through feedback from the peripherals; it analyzes the input from its various sources and carries out tasks in accordance with its programming, which takes the form of hardwired circuits and software commands.

In a manner similar to the CPU, the monist might propose, the brain is designed and constructed to supervise and direct the functioning of the body. The brain receives information about the environment from the senses; using both "hardwired," genetically determined structural pathways that developed through evolution, and "software" learned from the environment, the brain executes its programming based on the information it receives. In both the computer and biological cases, "mind" could be defined as the incoming information or stimuli, the accommodation and analysis of this information by the program, and the outgoing commands or responses. A generous monist might be willing to grant a certain degree of self-awareness in the biological case, stating simply that the biological program has the ability to observe its own functioning and learn from it, but that the advent of artificial intelligence in computer science has provided computers with the same ability. And the monist must insist that destruction of the brain ends the existence of the mind, just as destruction of the computer ends the program.

The dualist position states that mind and body are distinct entities that interact while the body lives and go their separate ways with the body's death. To begin, the dualist might agree to an extent with the monist's computer analogy. The brain *does* bear resemblance to a biological CPU, in that it represents the point at which organic "circuits" meet, interact, exchange information, and formulate action. There *are* genetic and environmental determinants of behavior. But, the dualist would argue, such capabilities fall far short of describing the totality of human nature, activities, and existence. The human capacity for creativity, insight, self-actualization and growth, intuition, and personal relationships goes far beyond what any computer, or animal, analogy could hope to represent. Further, the dualist might point out, there exists evidence that humans possess free will, and such a capacity could never be accurately represented by a monist perspective. To clarify the position, the dualist could appeal to another analogy: the player piano. Yes, the piano can play according to a determined pattern, without the aid of an instrumentalist; but someone capable of writing new songs can sit down at the keyboard and play tunes for which no program exists. It is the same piano in both cases;

the question is whether anyone is sitting at the bench. The dualist says yes.

Were the monist and dualist to debate their positions, the monist would strongly object to the dualist's reasoning. The concept of an independently existing mind is inherently unscientific, the monist would say. There is no anatomical or physiological evidence for the mind's separate existence. There is no precedent in the natural world for free will or independent, non-determined thought or consciousness. Such apparently real activities are actually epiphenomenal, that is, merely by-products of physical experience. To claim that humans possess these special abilities is to distance our species from the natural order of which we are so obviously a part. The scientific principle of parsimony (Occam's Razor) demands that we trim all unnecessary speculation from our theories; the theories may be broadened only when empirical evidence leaves us no choice. Therefore, since current theories of cognition and behavior can in principle explain all human activity without resorting to the concept of independent mind, there is no justification for the dualist's point of view.

It seems, then, that the dualist's position rests merely on a hunch and a hope. There appears to be no experimental evidence capable of driving the cautious scientist to propose dualism. Occam's Razor has cut the mind out of the picture. Or has it? We should ask what kind of evidence would be sufficient to cause doubt about the monist's airtight scientific paradigm. Certainly it is difficult to conceive of an experiment that would unambiguously demonstrate the mind's existence independent of the body. Only the final experiment, the death of the body, could conceivably provide such evidence, and then only to the dead person. And none who have died have come back to convince us of the mind's continued existence, have they?

### **The Near-Death Experience**

Raymond Moody (1975) was the first modern investigator to compile cases of the near-death experience (NDE). He found that the NDE, a subjective psychological experience, is undergone by a considerable fraction of people who are threatened with physical death but survive. The details of the NDE, discussed below, can be interpreted to support the dualist position, and Moody leaned in the dualist direction. But one must acknowledge at the outset that the NDE does not constitute the "perfect experiment," since those having an NDE do not meet perma-

nent physical death by definition. It will become clear, however, that the NDE presents some true problems for the monist.

Moody's investigation, while a crucial first step in near-death research, lacked the scientific precision and statistical analyses that could have given his work more credibility. Kenneth Ring (1980, 1984), a psychologist who was inspired by Moody's book, put considerable effort into scientifically establishing the NDE as a widely experienced and largely reproducible psychological phenomenon. Ring found, among other interesting results, that the occurrence of the NDE did not depend on whether the NDEr had previously heard of the phenomenon; the NDE has occurred to those who were merely in a coma, as well as to those who were truly clinically dead, and suffered permanent brain damage as a result; and likelihood of experiencing an NDE did not depend on a person's religious faith or lack thereof.

Although each person's NDE is somewhat different, Ring was able to assemble a composite NDE from more than two hundred individual descriptions (Ring, 1984). It is important to note that individual experiences go far beyond Ring's summary; they are rich in detail and in potential for meaning. As an example, I quote from Ring's (1984, pp. 39-40) report of the NDE of an anthropologist injured in an auto accident:

It seemed to be sequential in nature, more or less, I say more or less because time itself seems to have disappeared during this period. But the first thing I noticed was that I was dead . . . [Could you see your body?] Oh, yes, quite clearly. I was floating in the air above the body . . . and viewing it down sort of a diagonal angle . . . Then, after that, I realized that I was able to float quite easily, even though I had no intention of doing that . . . Then I very quickly discovered also that not only was I floating and hence free from gravity but free also from any of the other constrictions that inhibit flight . . . I could also fly at a terrific rate of speed . . . and it seemed to produce a feeling of great joy and sense of actually flying in this total fashion . . . Then I noticed that there was a dark area ahead of me and as I approached it, I thought that it was some sort of tunnel and immediately, without further thought, I entered into it and then flew with an even greater sensation of the joy of flight . . . After what I now would imagine to be a relatively short period of time—although again time was dispensed with—I noticed a sort of circular light at a great distance which I assumed to be the end of the tunnel as I was roaring through it . . . And then I went through the tunnel and seemed to be in a different state. I was in different surroundings where everything seemed to be similarly illuminated by that same light and, uh, I saw other things in it, too . . . a number of people . . . I saw my father there, who had been dead for some twenty-five years . . . I also felt and

saw of course that everyone was in a state of absolute compassion to everything else . . . It seemed too that love was the major axiom that everyone automatically followed . . . Later I did feel, because of my children and the woman I was married to then, the urge to return . . . but I don't recall the trip back . . . [Did it seem like a dream?] No, it seemed nothing like a dream . . . It really is a strange sensation to be in, but it does give you a feeling that you are in a kind of eternity.

This individual's account matches closely with many others provided by Moody, Ring, and several other investigators. The major details, such as viewing one's body from above, having no sense of time, being uninfluenced by gravity, entering a dark tunnel and emerging in a completely different world, are repeated time and again in NDE reports.

The nature and consistency of these details are quite intriguing. Yet despite the common, reproducible features of the NDE, this still amounts (at first thought) to subjective experience that is not objectively verifiable. There are explanations other than a mind/body dissociation that one must first address. Parsimony requires that one demonstrate the inadequacy of all biological and psychological explanatory models for the NDE before embracing a dualist interpretation.

On second thought, one might be able to devise an experiment that would lend some objectivity to the accounts of NDErs. If one could arrange for unique, purely visual stimuli to be present at the time of an NDE, and if the NDEr could, after the experience, accurately describe these stimuli without previous knowledge of them, then monist explanations would be in deep trouble. If, further, the major details of the NDE listed above were shown to be compatible with predictions made from modern physics, then the dualist position would be greatly strengthened as well.

Michael Sabom (1982), a cardiologist, read Moody's work and was skeptical of Moody's dualist interpretation of the data. Sabom began a medical investigation of the NDE at the hospital in which he worked. He compiled more than one hundred NDE cases, most of them occurring during hospitalization and many during surgery. Sabom reported many interesting cases and observations, confirming almost all aspects of Moody's and Ring's studies. But the most important portion of Sabom's work involved operating room (OR) NDEs.

While not designed as such, OR NDEs provide a version of the visual experiment mentioned above. The patient is unconscious before being brought into the OR, and is probably not familiar with equipment or specific procedures used during surgery. Thus, if a patient has an NDE

under these conditions, the opportunity exists to compare the patient's recall of the details with the medical records and with standard medical practices. This experiment is not ideal, since a patient might be familiar enough with medicine to reconstruct the events fairly well, or may be able to hear under anesthetic and infer visual details from the sounds. Even with these flaws, the OR presents one of the best chances to evaluate the NDE objectively.

Sabom recognized this opportunity, and described in detail the experiences of ten patients who had OR NDEs and were attentive to the events in the OR during the NDE. Sabom found their memories to coincide extremely well with the medical records and procedures. For example, a man who suffered a cardiac arrest while hospitalized was able to observe in detail during his NDE the events leading to his revival. He recalled with amazing accuracy the behavior of the two meters on the defibrillator, even though he had never seen this machine in operation. Sabom verified the man's accuracy, which, Sabom said, would have required observing the defibrillator in action.

Sabom made a second major contribution to near-death research by making critical comparisons of the NDE with other psychological experiences proposed to explain the NDE in terms of monistic models. As I pointed out previously, monistic explanations must be shown to be inadequate before a dualist model can be proposed. Sabom went a long way in this direction by comparing the key features of the NDE with those of other psychological phenomena, such as autoscopic hallucinations and reactions to anesthetics. He showed that no monistic model yet proposed could account for the details of the NDE.

Given the frequency and consistency of the NDE, its uniqueness among psychological experiences, its apparent inability to be explained by monist models, and the strong medical evidence that some NDErs have observed their own revivals, one might suspect that the dualist model is the best fit to the data. At this point, however, the monist may declare that the entire question has been pushed completely beyond the realm of science. How can any aspect of the NDE be verified, understood, and accepted, the monist asks, if the NDE lies outside natural physical experience? How can we hope to integrate some dualistic interpretation of the NDE into the current body of scientific knowledge without this integration being highly suspect? The theory proposed below will, in its complete form, attempt to answer such questions in the greatest detail possible, by using as data the observations of the NDErs themselves and as a theoretical framework the latest results and ideas from chemistry and physics.

## Theoretical Cosmology

As is demonstrated each time a vehicle passes another on the highway, motion and velocity are relative quantities dependent on one's frame of reference. In ordinary life, all motion obeys this intuitive principle. It was the experimental determination early in this century that the speed of light is the same for all observers, regardless of reference frame, that stimulated Albert Einstein to consider the ramifications of such a surprising, counter-intuitive result.

The invariance of the speed of light was considered at the time of its discovery to be contradictory to the well-established principle of relativity, the concept that the general laws of physics are the same in all reference frames moving uniformly relative to each other. Einstein (1961) proposed that in fact there was no contradiction and that both these principles could be accepted as true, providing that some other cherished concepts were abandoned. He thereby derived from these two principles the special theory of relativity. The major results of this theory are (1) the time interval between two events and the distance between two points on a rigid rod depend on the state of motion of the reference body; that is, distance and time, those seemingly constant quantities, depend on the motion of the observer; (2) time can be treated mathematically as a fourth dimension equivalent to length, width, and height. Therefore, space and time lose their distinction and the resulting four-dimensional universe in which we live can be called spacetime; (3) a body with non-zero mass can never reach the speed of light, and will increase in mass as its velocity approaches the speed of light; and (4) energy and mass are equivalent to each other and can be interconverted. A great deal of experimental evidence gathered after Einstein published the special theory, not the least of which being the atomic bomb, demonstrated the theory's validity.

The special theory refers to frames of reference that are in *uniform* motion relative to each other. The general theory of relativity begins with the postulate that the laws of physics are the same in *all* (including accelerated) reference frames. This generalization paves the way for the development of the highly mathematical and highly accurate general theory. One result of the general theory is that mass can be represented as a "warp" or depression in the very fabric of spacetime. Gravity is thus a consequence of this spacetime curvature, and not a true force associated with properties of interacting bodies; when a small body is drawn to a large one, as when a meteorite falls to earth, the small body is effectively moving into a spacetime depression. A

second result of general relativity is that, due to the curvature of spacetime by mass, light (composed of massless photons) will be influenced in its path through space by very massive objects, such as stars and galaxies. This prediction has been experimentally verified by astronomers. A third result is that the motion of clocks is influenced by gravity, so that time depends, for example, on the height of the observer above the earth. Again, this prediction is consistent with experiment.

The general theory of relativity suggests that spacetime in the absence of matter is in some sense "flat," at least in nearby (local) regions of the universe, and deviates from "flatness" under the influence of mass. This deviation increases as the mass of an object increases. The existence of this or any other type of curvature of spacetime implies the existence of at least one dimension beyond our familiar four. In order to see this point more clearly, consider a two-dimensional analogy. A universe of two spatial dimensions would contain only length and width; it would correspond to a plane or slice through our three-dimensional space. Occupants of a two-dimensional universe would have absolutely no concept of the third spatial dimension, height. From the occupants' point of view, a body entering their world from the third dimension would appear literally from nowhere, and simply vanish when it left. It would be difficult to convince these occupants of the third dimension's existence, since it could not be seen or detected in any way. Similarly, the concept of curvature of the two-dimensional universe would be quite foreign to the occupants, and thus very difficult to conceptualize.

Now suppose that this two-dimensional universe is in fact curved on a very large (non-local) scale. This curvature could be represented by placing a sheet of paper on a table, lifting one end of the sheet, and curling the paper so that one end is on the table and the other end lies above the first. The occupants of this universe are constrained to move and perceive only in the two available dimensions; they cannot look "above" their location to see "the other end" of their universe, since "above" has no reality to them. To those living in three-dimensional space, this curvature of the two-dimensional universe is real and observable, but *only* because of the existence of the third dimension.

General relativity proposes that our own spacetime is curved on a very large scale, as in the analogy above, as well as possessing local curvature under the influence of mass. These curvatures are imperceptible to us, but their existence can be inferred from the theory. Therefore, the existence of higher dimensions can also be inferred. But we

need not stop at these inferences, for relativity makes further predictions. One prediction concerns the aging and eventual demise of stars.

At the end of a star's life, when its hydrogen fuel is nearly spent, the star undergoes radical changes. These changes can range from a dramatic cooling and loss of luminosity to death by supernova, given sufficient initial star mass. If the star is large enough, the core remaining after the supernova will eventually collapse under its own gravity, according to general relativity, into an extremely small and infinitely dense collection of matter called a black hole. The spacetime representation of a black hole is an infinitely deep depression (a "hole") in the spacetime continuum, causing such severe curvature that even the massless photons of light that come within a certain distance cannot escape, thus giving the hole its black appearance. This phenomenon is predicted by the equations of relativity, and evidence of black holes has been found at the center of several galaxies. The case for higher dimensions is therefore strengthened.

The same equations that predict and describe black holes also predict another type of spacetime distortion: the wormhole, an entity of intense interest to theoretical cosmologists in the last decade. The wormhole can exist in association with a black hole, or independently. It can constitute a pathway, a shortcut as it were, between distant parts of our universe. Within the analogy of our two-dimensional universe described above, passage through a wormhole could conceivably allow one to move from one end of the sheet of paper to the other without passing any of the points in-between (in the two-dimensional universe). Again, such a thing is possible only because a higher dimension is available. A representation similar to our two-dimensional model with a connecting wormhole is given in Figure 1.

The equations of general relativity allow, in addition to wormholes connecting different parts of our universe, wormholes that connect ours with one or more other universes. The analogy here is to two planar universes connected by a wormhole (see Figure 1). This type of wormhole explicitly acknowledges the higher dimensions implied in the earlier results of relativity, and invites one to imagine leaving our spacetime for other destinations as yet unnamed. Note that the wormhole shown in Figure 1 displays cylindrical symmetry and funnel-like openings at both ends.

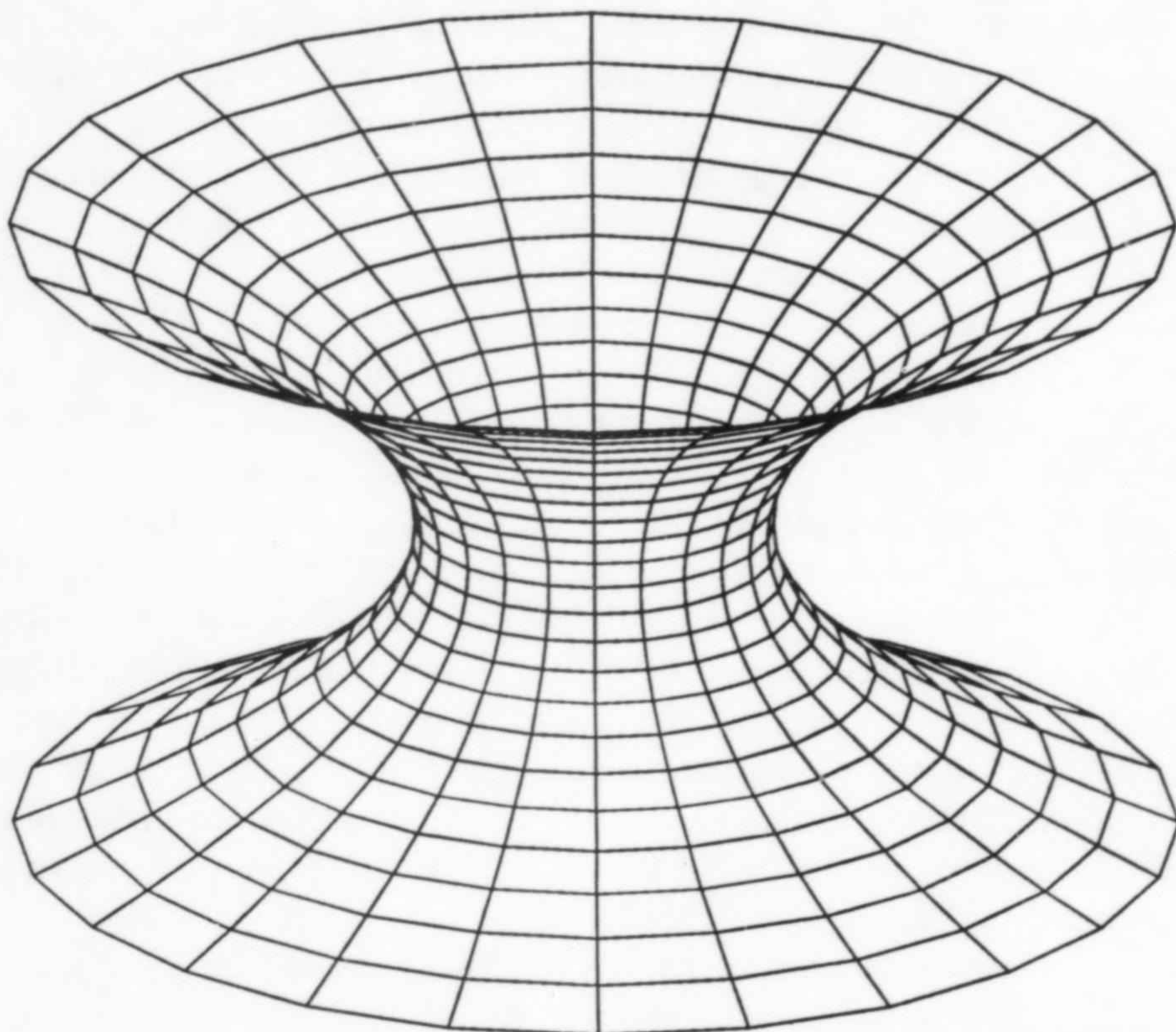
The greatest cosmologist since Einstein is Stephen Hawking. In his description of cosmology, Hawking (1988, p. 147) proposed that: "Our subjective sense of the direction of time, the psychological arrow of time, is therefore determined within our brain by the thermodynamic

**Figure 1**

**A three-dimensional wormhole connecting two planar spacetimes, one "above" and one "below" the wormhole.**

One mentally allows the "mouths" of the wormhole to smoothly approach and coalesce with parallel two-dimensional surfaces, which can represent either two separate universes or two distant regions of a single universe. Adapted from Misner, Thorne, and Wheeler (1973).

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arrow of time . . . we must remember things in the order in which entropy increases." The "thermodynamic arrow of time" is determined by the universe's direction of motion (expansion). Our sense of time, then, is a result of our being part of the material universe. Thus, if one were to leave this universe for another through a wormhole, it seems one would leave behind this universe's definition of time, space, and gravity as well.

To briefly summarize, the field of modern theoretical cosmology began with the musings of Einstein over two apparently true but apparently contradictory principles in experimental physics. His resolution of the

seeming conflict challenged normal modes of thought and the common-sense assumptions of the time. The resulting theories of special and general relativity provided empirically testable predictions, many of which have been shown to be correct. In the process of trying to understand our universe and its physical laws, Einstein and those who continued his work were led to a paradigm that suggests the existence of other universes. Thus, it appears that the nature of our existence and our world may be intimately intertwined with worlds beyond.

The physicists working on such problems readily admit that there is as yet no evidence for the existence of wormholes. That fact has not, however, slowed research on the size, number, distribution, destination, and traversability of wormholes. Thus there are predictions from physics on these various questions, but with no apparent means of empirically testing the predictions. The theory of essence offers the possibility of such testing by drawing together the fields of cosmology and near-death research.

### **The Theory of Essence**

It is instructive to read carefully the account of the anthropologist's NDE quoted earlier, while referring to Figure 1. Commencing with the death of his body, the NDEr's mind or consciousness seemed to dissociate from the body. He was able to view the body from an exterior location, and found himself to be free from both time and gravity. He realized that his motion was unrestrained by physical laws and was limited only by his thoughts. During his "flight," the NDEr came upon "a dark area" that was the entrance to a tunnel-like passageway. At the end, after traversing the tunnel, he observed a circular opening into a completely different reality.

The correspondence of the NDEr's description with the representation in Figure 1 is very strong. An observer free to leave this universe and travel interdimensionally would leave gravity and time behind as well. Coming upon a wormhole, the observer would see a hole in spacetime that one could reasonably suppose to be dark. The use of the word "tunnel" to describe the wormhole is valid, since both tunnels and wormholes have cylindrical symmetry. As predicted by relativity, the ends of the wormhole would appear "circular" from the inside. Emerging on the other side of the wormhole, the observer would be exposed to a totally new and (perhaps initially) unfamiliar universe where his or her previous conceptions of time, and indeed of life, would not necessarily apply.

In order to emphasize the similarities between the NDE tunnel and the mathematically predicted wormhole, I quote the tunnel experiences of a few NDErs below. It is important to remember that each of these observations was made independently and that the experience is very hard to put into words. Given these facts, the agreement among the descriptions is impressive (the emphases are those of the speakers themselves):

Well, it was like night. It was dark. It was dark. But it was like, like [pause] like in the dark sky. Space. Dark. And it was—there weren't any *things* around. No stars or objects around. (Ring, 1980, p. 55)

I do remember thinking to myself that I was dying. And I felt I was floating through a tunnel . . . When I say *tunnel*, the only thing I can think of is—you know, those sewer pipes, those big pipes they put in? It was round like that, but it was enormous. I really couldn't see the edges of it; I got the feeling that it was round. (Ring, 1980, p. 54)

The first thing I remember was a tremendous rushing sound, a tremendous [searching for words] . . . It's very hard to find the right words to describe. The closest thing that I could *possibly* associate it with is, possibly, the sound of a tornado—a tremendous, gushing wind, but almost pulling me. And I was being pulled into a narrow point from a wide area. (Sort of going into a funnel?) Yes! Yes. And it was [pause] nothing painful. There was nothing frightening about it. It was just something that I felt I gave myself into completely. And it felt *good*. (Ring, 1980, p. 63)

I felt as though I was—well, that's the hard part to explain—like you're floating. Like you're *there* and, believe it or not, the color is—there *is* no color [pause] it's like a darkness. (Did the darkness have a shape of any kind?) It was empty. Yeah, that's it. Space. Just nothing. Nothing but something. It's like trying to describe the end of the universe. (Ring, 1980, p. 55)

The sense of space without matter, the complete darkness, the funnel-like entrance, and the cylindrical shape are all consistent with the idea of interdimensional travel as represented by relativity theory. Indeed, as the last quoted NDEr said, it is like trying to describe the end of the universe, for that is exactly what it is.

At this juncture, I find it very easy and natural to seriously consider the dualist position on the mind/body problem. Such consideration is necessary if potential answers to the difficult questions concerning the NDE are to be entertained. The NDE evidence itself is strongly suggestive of dualism, and when combined with the results of relativity the argument becomes compelling. There are very obvious parallels with many forms of religion; dissociated "mind" or "consciousness" could

easily be called "soul" or "spirit." To avoid the religious and psychological connotations of all these terms, I will refer to the dissociated human consciousness as the "essence," since it obviously contains the cognitions, memories, emotions, and other essential components of the human personality.

The theory of essence, then, states that human nature is dualistic. While in this universe, we are composed both of a physical body and an essence, which is the seat of consciousness and thought. Upon the death of the body, the essence is disengaged from this spacetime and travels via a connecting wormhole to locales imperceptible to us while in physical form. Furthermore, rather than defying scientific understanding, the essence has some attributes and makes observations that are consistent with known principles of science and with predictions of modern physics. A full realization of the theory, which is currently under development, will place these attributes and observations in a rational, unified scientific context.

### Conclusion

The maturation of both near-death research and cosmological theory offers science its first opportunity to ask and possibly answer questions that penetrate to the very core of human nature. The theory I have outlined goes beyond speculation and dogma and attempts a synthesis of two apparently disparate disciplines while being true to the scientific method.

The theory of essence in its fully realized form will provide predictions that can be tested from two directions. First, NDE data may be used to rule out or support the results of cosmological theories that have so far proved impossible to test experimentally. It is conceivable that physicists may be able to refine their models as a result. Second, physicists possibly can derive predictions based specifically on the concept of essence; these predictions can then be compared with the NDE data. Such developments lie far into the future, but are very exciting to contemplate.

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# Similarities Between Near-Death Experiences and Multiple Personality Disorder

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper I compare the phenomenology of near-death experiences to that of multiple personality disorder. The comparison reveals a number of similarities, including out-of-body experiences, the transcendental environment, encounter with the higher self, possible temporal lobe involvement, and antecedent child abuse. Rather than being disparate and unrelated experiences, I suggest that the near-death experience and multiple personality disorder may be variants of the same basic phenomenological pattern.

Recently two psychotherapists independently referred adult clients to me who had had near-death experiences (NDEs) as children. I was told the first client had had an NDE when she was 3 or 4 years old because of an uncle's sexual abuse and that she was currently being treated for multiple personality disorder (MPD). The second client believed she had an NDE when she was about 6 months old, and she revealed her MPD during our interview about her near-death experience. Thus began my inquiry into similarities between NDEs and MPD.

I had studied at least one woman prior to the above interviews for whom being sexually abused when 10 or 12 years old by her father led directly to her NDE (Serdahely, 1987-88). And I had interviewed at least two other women who reported having out-of-body experiences (OBEs) during the time they were being sexually abused. However, as I

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looked through my files, I noticed I had at least two other respondents who seemed to have MPD. One person who was sexually abused as a child seemed to be in contact with what MPD therapists call the "Inner Self Helper." The other person, who was severely physically abused as well as sexually abused as a child, was being treated for MPD at the time she wrote to me at age 44 about her NDEs.

More recently, I have interviewed two other women who (at the time of this writing) are being treated for MPD. The first person was abused as a child; had a surgical operation at age 8 from which she nearly died and consequently had an NDE; and subsequently developed MPD (she believes) at age 14 or 15. The other person continues to be the victim of ritualistic physical and sexual abuse allegedly perpetrated primarily by her adopted parents and biological father. She has nearly died several times from this heinous abuse and has had NDEs in the process. She believes she was multiple at a young age, possibly by age 6.

These remarkable women have kindly shared with me the very painful and personal events that precipitated their NDEs and brought on their MPD. Their courage to share has enabled me to see some similarities between NDEs and MPD. The remainder of this paper is devoted to describing these similarities.

In investigating MPD, I have relied on the testimony of my respondents and the MPD literature (Braun, 1990; Kluft, 1984; Noll, 1989; Putnam, 1989; Ross, 1989). The traditional MPD literature has its own jargon and theoretical constructs. It refers to the core personality of the client as the "host," and to the other (i.e., dual or multiple) personalities as "alters." (I have argued elsewhere the alters *may* be other spirits rather than a splitting of the host personality [Serdahely, unpublished paper].) The MPD literature also uses the term "dissociation," meaning the splitting of the host into alters, and, in general, considers the splitting as pathological. (I have also argued [Serdahely, unpublished paper] that MPD is not *ipso facto* pathological but can be viewed as a spiritual emergency—to use transpersonal psychological terminology—to cope with overwhelming pain.)

With these differences in constructs in mind, this paper discusses the following similarities between NDEs and MPDs:

- out-of-body experiences and pain relief;
- the transcendental environment of light;
- the Higher Self and the Inner Self Helper;
- other similarities, such as returning to the body, time distortion, floating, and helping spirits;

groups of entities;  
"hell";  
temporal lobe involvement; and  
child abuse.

### **Out-of-Body Experiences and Pain Relief**

The out-of-body experience (OBE) is a well-known phenomenon associated with near-death experiences. Raymond Moody identified the OBE as one of the basic elements of an NDE (Moody, 1975), and Kenneth Ring labeled the "sense of detachment from one's physical body" as Stage 2 in his 5-stage typology of NDEs (1980).

Often accompanying an out-of-body experience is the NDEr's sense of being pain-free. One of my NDE respondents, who was nearly killed when a truck running a red light crashed into her car, said she immediately went into the out-of-body state. When she was "up there" (her words), she was free of pain. However, as soon as she returned to her body, it immediately was the "worst pain," in her words.

There is evidence to suggest that individuals with MPD may also have out-of-body experiences.

MPD researcher Colin Ross wrote:

Many MPD patients have had out-of-body experiences, which originally occurred during childhood abuse. The little girl would float up to the ceiling and count the dots in the plaster or travel to another location to play with dolls or friends. Later in life such experiences can become more complex and can occur independently of traumatic events. (1989, p. 16)

Robert Mayer reported an MPD client who, as a girl, was burned by her mother. The client said she then "went up high in the sky." Later, she regained consciousness with gauze over her face (1988, p. 252).

In his second book on MPD, Mayer wrote one of his MPD clients told him: "We weren't affected by [the torture and abuse]. We had left the body and floated up to the ceiling. We watched it all from above" (1991, p. 126). He continued "We were away from it, so we didn't feel anything" (p. 128).

Several of the individuals with MPD I have interviewed confirmed that when they left their bodies during heinous abuse, they no longer felt pain. Such pain relief experienced by MPD patients seems identical to that experienced by NDErs.

Edith Fiore wrote that one of her MPD clients recalled that as an adult he sometimes did not feel like occupying his body, and he then "stepped back and to the left from [his] head about one foot" (1988, p. 68).

Another Fiore MPD client said, "If you stay too long [out-of-body], sometimes you cannot come back" (p. 85). One of my NDE respondents made a similar comment to me: during her NDE caused by an attempted suicide at age 17, Jesus suddenly halted the telepathic communication taking place between them in the tunnel. He said if she didn't go back then, her body would not survive.

Fiore's female MPD client quoted above also said she came back into her body through her head. Some NDErs have made an identical statement when asked about the reentry into their body.

Last, a sense of the similarity of the OBE of an MPD client to that of an NDEr is given in the following quote. When this MPD client is not in control of his body and another personality (or alter) is, he said:

It's like I'm lying face down on a sheet of glass that stretches out forever, and I can look down through it. Beyond that, in the farthest ground, it seems like stars of outer space, but then there's a circle, a beam of light. It's almost as if it's coming out of my eyes because it's always in front of me. (Keyes, 1981, p. 374)

The "sheet of glass" image is not too dissimilar to NDErs looking down on their bodies below. And, this MPD client's image of outer space is similar to the dark tunnel or void of NDErs. Finally, the circle of light is extremely reminiscent of the NDEr's light at the tunnel's end.

One of this MPD client's alters said that the other alters (whom he believed were real people and not splintered personalities [p. 61, p. 105]) reside in a "dark" region when not in control of the host's body (p. 116), a description not unlike "the dark region or void" of Michael Sabom's NDErs (1982, pp. 41-42).

Having seen a similarity with OBEs and possibly the tunnel with a light at its end, do individuals with MPD ever go into a transcendental environment similar to that reported by NDErs?

### **The Transcendental Environment of Light**

Sabom termed the light after the dark void "the transcendental environment" (1982, p. 44), a realm of "scenic beauty." He wrote that the descriptions of his 28 transcendental NDErs "varied considerably"

(p. 44), including pastoral settings, landscapes, clouds, mist, and "heavenly descriptions" which sometimes included a gate "perceived to be the entrance to heaven" (p. 46).

One of my NDE respondents had 3 successive near-death experiences due to pulmonary emboli. In her second NDE she said she went into a "beautiful garden" with tropical plants, *kind* of like the "Garden of Eden." "It was misty and everything was real fresh smelling, like fresh sprayed plants or fresh sprayed fruits, something real misty that smells real good."

Another said his NDE brought him into a beautiful lighted meadow with a stream, mountains, and flowers. He told me this place was like "heaven" to him.

Barbara Walker (personal communication, 1989) once received a written description of an NDE along with a drawing of a gate or gates to Heaven. And one of my respondents had a transcendental, loving light experience at the time of her beloved grandmother's death. She felt she accompanied her grandmother's presence to gates that opened in the middle and through which her grandmother passed.

Once again we find similarities between NDErs' descriptions and those of individuals with MPD. When Mayer asked about the internal world of an MPD client, the woman said it was

a beautiful, Tolkien-like Shangri-La with mountains, rivers, streams, valleys, wooded paths, caves, trees, and flowers. Most of the time it was sunny and pleasant, and the rain was always gentle and warm. (1988, p. 73)

When an alter wanted to take control of the host's body, the alter "walked to one end of this paradise, where there was a gate to the real world" (p. 73). The client said she and the alters lived in a garden with a gate, and when they wanted control of the body, they went through the gate.

Another of Mayer's MPD clients drew a picture of a structure that resembled a light bulb. All the alters lived inside the "bulb." "There was a corridor leading to the spot where a normal bulb screws in. When one of [the alters] wanted to come out [i.e., take control of the body], he or she went down the corridor to that spot and then came out" (1988, p. 172).

The journey for that MPD alter from the top of a "light bulb" down through its stem sounds a lot like the reverse of the NDEr's journey, which starts in the tunnel and goes into the light.

Ralph Allison (1980) also asked MPD clients where they and the alters reside. One client said the following: As an alter travels higher, the "colors become lighter" and purer (p. 142). A feeling of safety and security occurs as one goes higher. "This is where 'heaven' is," one said, referring to where the alters go (p. 142). And, "this [i.e., up above or 'heaven'] is also where the [other Inner Self Helpers or ISHs] exist" (p. 142). This place is bright and clear, with pastel colors. "This space is quite large, with more than enough room for us all" (p. 142). Pastel colors have been described by NDErs as well (Barbara Walker, personal communication, 1989).

Last, I have recently interviewed an individual with MPD who said that during abuse she would travel to a "green place" that is warm, bright, and safe. This is a place of "fresh aromas," "a clean, earth smell like just after it has rained." This person's description here is very similar to that of the NDEr I quoted above describing her second of three successive NDEs.

### **The Higher Self and the Inner Self Helper**

Ring used the term "Higher Self" in his book *Life at Death* (1980). And MPD therapist Allison is given credit for coining the phrase "Inner Self Helper," or ISH. I believe the Higher Self of the NDEr is identical to the Inner Self Helper of the person with MPD.

Ring wrote the NDEr may be confronted by a brilliant, golden light that is awesome, overwhelming, loving, and unconditionally accepting of the NDEr. The NDEr may perceive this light as being divine and, therefore, separate from oneself, when in fact the personality of the NDEr is but one aspect of his or her Higher Self. The illusion is separation, but the personality of the NDEr is a part of the Higher Self. The Higher Self is "all-knowing" about the NDEr (1980, p. 241), being knowledgeable about the NDEr's past and future (pp. 240-43).

With respect to MPD, Allison wrote that the Inner Self Helper feels only love, "expresses both awareness of and belief in God" (1980, p. 131), and "is a conduit for God's healing power and love" (p. 131). The ISH knows the past history of the MPD client and can predict accurately that person's future. It is pure intellect and answers questions in an unemotional way. The ISH "appears as a separate" entity (p. 131), but after fusion of the alters only the host personality and the ISH remain. Allison went on to say the ISH is present in persons both with and without MPD (p. 131).

Ring, in his discussion of the Higher Self, made reference to the "guardian angels" seen by some NDErs. He concluded that the Higher Self and the guardian angels are the same phenomena (1980, p. 244).

In *Katherine—It's Time* (Castle and Bechtel, 1989), MPD client Kit Castle wrote that an entity she called "Michael" was her guardian angel, a being who has loved her unconditionally through all she has been through. Stefan Bechtel, who co-authored the book, indicated he interviewed Michael, who said he was the "guardian and healer" of Kit (p. xiv). Bechtel asked Michael if he was a part of Kit. Michael replied, "I am both one with Kit, and yet not one with Kit" (p. xiv), suggesting the very same relationship Ring described between the NDEr and the Higher Self: a separate personality that is connected to something greater than that personality.

### Other Similarities Between NDEs and MPD

Readers of the near-death experience literature will find the following traits and phenomena quite familiar.

#### *Leaving and Reentering the Body*

Some NDErs say they left their physical body and/or returned through their head. They may say they came back into the body with a "jolt."

Fiore (1988) reported that when alters leave the MPD client's body, the host may sense the alters leaving through the client's head. Or there may be "a rippling up through the body or leaving through the chest" (p. 133) as the alters leave the body. NDErs have also reported a feeling of an energy traveling up the body or leaving through the chest.

Allison reported a similar finding for some of his MPD clients. The way to come into and go out of the body, he wrote, seems to be located for some MPD clients at the top of the forehead (1980, p. 141). As I noted earlier, one of Fiore's MPD clients reported coming back into her body through the head.

And Mayer, like other MPD therapists, reported that the MPD client (i.e., the host) will close his or her eyes, and the client's head may droop onto the shoulder. Then, with a *jolt*, the head rises with the alter now in control of the body (1991, p. 65).

#### *The "Silver Cord"*

Ring mentioned the possibility of a "silver cord" or "tube, thread [or] rope . . . which is said to unite" the physical body with the soul/spirit/consciousness that is out of the body during an NDE (1980, p. 52). He wrote he was unable to find any NDE respondents in his original study who conclusively verified the existence of such a cord (p. 53). When I have asked my NDE respondents about a cord, they frequently say they did not look for one or they did not see one during their NDE.

However, one of my respondents did see a cord during an out-of-body experience as she was recovering from surgery in a hospital. She wrote she was in "such pain," at which time she floated out of her body. "I was attached to something," she said. That "something" was long, thin, and of undetermined color. It moved with her during her OBE. It was attached to the back of her physical body and to the lower spine of her floating body. "It would remind me of the umbilical cord," she wrote.

One of my MPD respondents also noted a cord during an OBE resulting from her body being ritualistically abused. Her ISH drew a picture for me showing the cord connecting the physical body to where all of the alters, the core personality, and the ISH were staying while out of body. In a letter to me, the ISH wrote:

As the spirit drifts into [the dark void], it travels within three wisps of smoke. (The umbilical cord which connects the child to [the] mother contains two arteries and one vein.)

The cord description of my MPD respondent's ISH is remarkably similar to that of my OBEr's. Both use the analogy of an umbilical cord.

### *Floating*

It is quite common to hear NDErs say that when they were out of their body they *floated* down a tunnel. If they reached the brilliant, white Light, they may say they floated past pastoral settings or over perfect grass or towards deceased loved ones.

Allison noted that his MPDRs said the way the alters move is by *floating* (1980, p. 143): "We all [i.e., the alters] drift quite frequently if we have nothing to hold onto, such as feelings or emotions" (p. 143).

### *Telepathic Communication*

NDE researchers have long known that communication during an NDE is not by words. NDErs commonly say that a transmission of thought occurred between them and a deceased relative or a religious being.

Allison found the very same phenomenon for MPD. When he inquired about communication, his clients said the alters can communicate through great distances by sending "waves of feelings back and

forth" (1980, p. 143). One of my MPD respondents confirmed that communication between her alters during an OBE was telepathic.

### *Time Distortion*

Many NDErs say that time is distorted during their NDE. The near-death experience may have lasted a millisecond or an eternity; it is that difficult to estimate time on the "other side."

With respect to MPD, Allison wrote that an alter told him there is no time where the alters go when they are not in control of the body. The alter went on to say:

An hour on the outside [i.e., when in control of the body] is only a few seconds for us on the inside. The reverse is also true. This is probably why time is confusing not only for Sylvia [the host] but for all of us [alters]. We often get dates and events mixed up (1980, p. 143).

The latter is not too dissimilar to what Ring wrote about prophetic visions of NDErs. Ring (1984) noted it was not easy for these NDErs to pinpoint precisely the date or the time of their vision of the future.

### *Helping Spirits*

The NDE literature is replete with examples of spirits coming to help the NDEr (Serdahely, 1992). Melvin Morse's first article on NDEs described the NDE of 7-year-old Kristle who is met by Elizabeth while in the tunnel. Kristle later described Elizabeth as her guardian angel (Morse, 1983; Morse and Perry, 1990).

Mayer, in particular, found helping spirits in conjunction with his work with MPD clients. Colleen, one of his clients, had a guardian angel who "claimed to live in the space above Colleen and would enter the body to talk to [Dr. Mayer]. She said that she had been with her since childhood . . ." (1991, p. 195).

With regard to another MPD client, Mayer reported talking to an entity named Sasha. Mayer thought Sasha was an alter of the host. But Sasha said she was separate from, and not a part of, the host and had come to help "a soul in trouble" (1991, p. 251).

Finally, Mayer treated another MPD client who had 3 spirits or angels who called themselves the "Dark Ones" appear to her during the years she was coping with childhood abuse. The "Dark Ones" said

they were guardian angels who were sent "to help her" (1988, p. 87). It is quite possible the helping spirits for these MPD clients are the Inner Self Helpers discussed above. Nevertheless, they are still helping spirits from the other side.

### *Light Beings*

Fiore (1988) briefly mentioned light beings in her discussion of MPD. She wrote that occasionally light beings come to help with the removal of a reluctant spirit associated with the body of the MPD client.

I have encountered a similar, although not identical, description with one of my adolescent NDE respondents, who said that she was escorted by two light figures or beings, one on either side of her, as she traveled down the tunnel (Serdahely, 1990).

### *Psychic Abilities*

The association of psychic abilities with NDEs was well documented by Ring (1984). His research determined the increase in psychic sensitivity following an NDE. Such an association appears to exist for individuals with MPD as well.

With respect to his clinical experience with MPD, Allison wrote that his clients "often" have psychic abilities (1980, p. 40), and cited one who saw auras. Fiore mentioned an MPD client who had psychic experiences as a child (1988, p. 67), but did not specify the experiences. And Daniel Keyes, the author of *The Minds of Billy Milligan*, wrote Billy's mother claimed Billy (who had MPD) always had ESP (1981, p. 109).

### *Spheres of Energy and Light*

Allison included a conversation in his book with an alter named Renatta, who said she sees each alter in two ways: (1) as a physical form with a face, limbs, hair, and different voices; and (2) as "spheres, or balls of energy" (1980, p. 142). "Each sphere has a different color and brightness according to who and what they are," according to Renatta (Allison, 1980, p. 142).

An NDEr whose account is in my case files also described seeing "spheres" of light during his NDE. He described going through a tunnel towards a light. At the tunnel's end, he saw

a universe of fantastic colors. The colors were spherical and I could feel energy from them. There were spheres of blue/green light/energy in the background. . . . [He refers to the spheres as having light and yet possessing energy. He could feel the energy from them.] Off to the right . . . was an enormous sphere of yellow tinged light/energy. . . . I wanted to . . . explore the beautiful spheres of light. . . . As soon as I posed the question in my mind, "Why did I stop?," I was told why. What came to me was an exhilaration of joy, tranquility and peacefulness . . . absolutely total acceptance. I felt their energy going through me, around me and into me. The only word I could describe this with is "love" . . . the absolute unconditional feelings were that of love and they told me so. "They" are the entities in the spheres of light.] I saw them. I felt them. I experienced them. We communicated simultaneously [i.e., he and the spheres of light and energy]. I was given by them and told by them a totality of knowledge. I stood in awe of it all and experienced their energy flooding me. I turned to the white/yellow sphere that was closest to me . . . and I looked deep into it. I knew then I was in heaven or that which can be called heaven. I knew I was looking into the face of God [the yellow light]. My impulse was to dive into the middle of the sphere. It was at this point I started moving backward [to return to his body].

As mentioned above in the "Transcendental Environment" section, Allison wrote that an alter described heaven as where alters go when they go higher, a place of safety and security with colors mainly of blue and yellow and pastels of green, red, brown, and gold. That description plus the reporting of the "spheres, or balls of energy" seen by an alter are remarkably similar to this individual's account of his NDE. Also, Walker has encountered NDE accounts that included descriptions of pastel colors in them (Barbara Walker, personal communication, 1990), which again is quite similar to Allison's finding.

### Groups of Entities

Another interesting similarity between MPD and NDEs is the phenomenon of groups of entities. In MPD, it is well known that any number of alters may be associated with the host and the host's body. However, in his second book on MPD, Mayer actually referred to these alters as a "group" (1991). With regard to one client, he wrote that a particular alter is "from the other group" of alters (p. 116). At another point, he said to an alter, "Well, you're a member of a group that inhabits a body" (p. 238). And, at still another point, he told a group of alters that they saved the client's life. "When they saw that they had a

positive impact, they just went away, never to be heard from again" (p. 254).

In my own files, I have accounts of several people who have had NDEs or NDE-like experiences who encountered groups of spirits or entities. Paradoxically, these groups were simultaneously unfamiliar and yet familiar to the experiencers. The group encountered by an NDEr seemed to be idiosyncratic for that person.

During one of my respondents' NDE, while out of body she could simultaneously see herself in the operating room and also see a group of spirits over to the side, rooting for her welfare. She was drawn to these spirits. She said she had known them before, and she felt totally loved by them. They were sent for her. They all smiled at her. Some were children. (She was never able to determine the identities of these children, even though she and I spent a good deal of time trying to determine just who they were. Curiously, some of the alters of MPD clients can be children.) One of these spirits was an elderly male. Others were not as clearly recognizable as the children and the man. "They were there for [me]; a part of a group" communicating to her that she would be just fine.

Another one of my NDErs also encountered a group of spirits as he traveled into the Light. He said there was "a group of people." They were happy to see him as he approached the group. (Interestingly, as he was approaching this group, he was sent back to his body by a male whom he did not know but who was authoritative in a kind way and who seemed to be "50 million years old," "a guy who was an experienced soul," as he put it. In light of our discussion earlier in this paper about the Higher Self and the Inner Self Helper, perhaps that is who this sagacious spirit was, as this NDEr did say this male was not a part of the group of spirits waiting for him. This old soul seems to fit the descriptions of Ring's Higher Self or Allison's Inner Self Helper.)

Another one of my NDErs also encountered a group of spirits during her NDE. She said there may have been 12 to 14 "energies" in this group, and described the group as a kind of unit or community that was waiting to welcome her in a friendly way, a group that was all-knowing about the NDEr. She somehow knew these spirits even though they were not deceased friends or relatives, and felt a part of this group.

Finally, one of my respondents who had a near-death-like experience also met a group of spirits. For some time, he had been terminally ill with a brain tumor. Approximately 1½ weeks before he died he had a dream where he went into a lighted area with a white hedge. On the other side of this hedge was a deceased cousin beckoning him to come across, along with a *group* of people with friendly faces.

What, if anything, are we to make of the phenomenon of groups of spirits? We do know that for some NDErs, a group of friendly spirits are there waiting for them and expressing concern for their welfare. And, we know that some individuals with MPD say the alters are a group of spirits there to help them cope with the heinous abuse and the overwhelming pain. And the NDE described above with an omniscient spirit plus a group of friendly spirits seems quite analogous to an MPD client's ISH and group of alters. Are we talking about the same phenomenon for both NDEs and MPDs, except that for the latter, the spirits intervene because a member of their group or unit is being badly mistreated? I think this may be a distinct possibility.

### Hell

Allison, in his book on multiple personality disorder, provided a description of a "personal hell" as related to him by alters. Bad thoughts and memories can be found here, along with repressed feelings like hatred and anger. These may grow into "hideous monsters" that may be black and very large. The physical body is reported to feel very heavy when the alter is experiencing this hellish state (1980, p. 142).

In her discussion of MPD, Fiore at one point wrote about near-death experiences precipitated by attempted suicides. She said in her view as a psychotherapist the "cloudiness" reported by some NDErs may be a reflection of the confusion they were experiencing at the time of their near death (1988, p. 29).

Regarding MPD, Fiore claimed she has done several thousand past life regressions in her clinical practice, and noted that in her clinical experience she has "never found one single case when a spirit was in a situation approximating the popular concept of hell" during a past-life regression.

The comments of MPD experts Allison and Fiore are not dissimilar to the observations of NDE researcher Margot Grey. Grey (1985) reviewed about 5 cases of what she called "negative NDEs." She then proposed a typology (p. 72) that parallels Ring's typology for positive NDEs.

Having elucidated 5 stages of a negative NDE, Grey later offered another explanation for these frightening experiences:

I am inclined to feel that a more generalized archetypal interpretation is a possibility in cases of hell-like experiences, where negative emo-

tions which have become trapped in the psyche are released during a near-death episode. (1985, p. 179)

Grey summarized by saying she was using "a primitive archetypal interpretation" to explain the negative NDEs she studied. She continued:

My view is that this [i.e., the negative archetypal images from the subconscious] refers to 'unfinished business' that has become trapped in the psyche or soul and which continues to cause problems until recognized and overcome. When this occurs, the emotional charge behind the event which has become blocked energy can then be discharged and the passage to progress freed from obstruction.

In cases of hell-like experience what seems to be happening is that it is not the emotion that causes problems on the astral plane, but rather the trouble is created as a result of what one chooses to do with that emotion. (1985, p. 191)

On a 1991 audiotape on NDEs, Moody was asked during the question-and-answer session whether he has ever encountered a negative NDE (Moody and Morse, 1991). Having interviewed several thousand NDErs, Moody unequivocally answered that he had not heard of even one such experience. His response is identical to that given by Fiore above with respect to negative experiences during life regressions.

While it is always risky to speculate based on such limited findings, nevertheless I am struck by the remarkable similarity between what Allison reported from his MPD work and what Grey reported from her NDE studies. According to these authors, the negativity or "hell-like" material is repressed, unfinished business for MPD in the first instance and for NDEs in the second.

Also, the findings of Fiore and of Moody are identical. Fiore did not find any "hell-like" experiences in her MPD clients' several thousand life regressions, and Moody did not find any "hell-like" NDEs in his several thousand NDE interviews.

### **Temporal Lobe Involvement**

Morse and his colleagues presented evidence to suggest a connection between the temporal lobes and near-death experiences (Morse, Castillo, Venecia, Milstein, and Tyler, 1986; Morse and Perry, 1990). These

researchers cited the Sylvian fissure as a possible location for NDE phenomena, relying primarily on the work of Wilder Penfield and Theodore Rasmussen. Penfield and his colleagues reported electrically stimulating points along the Sylvian fissure and observing that a few patients described experiencing something akin to an out-of-body experience. It is interesting, in this regard, to note that some of these patients of Penfield were also reported to be suffering from epilepsy, a point to which I will return shortly (Penfield and Jasper, 1954; Penfield and Rasmussen, 1950).

Temporal lobe involvement had been suggested before the causal pathways model was proposed by the Morse group (Morse, Castillo, Venecia, Milstein, and Tyler, 1986). Daniel Carr (1982), Ernst Rodin (1980), and Russell Noyes and Roy Kletti (1977) suggested that NDEs may be similar to temporal lobe epilepsy or electrical brain stimulation or related to temporal lobe seizures or associated with temporal lobe excitation (Sutherland, 1991).

Morse also suggested that the temporal lobe may be affiliated with other psychic experiences. On an audiotape, he alluded to the possibility that this area of the brain may be related to MPD, citing a case of a man diagnosed with multiple personality disorder who exhibited seizure activity in this region of the cerebrum (Moody and Morse, 1991).

The suggestion made by Morse about temporal lobe involvement in MPD can also be found in the MPD literature. Mayer indicated that one of his MPD clients was also epileptic (1988); it should be noted that it was the host personality, and not an alter, who was suffering from epilepsy.

Frank Benson, Bruce Miller, and Stephen Signer reported two clients who each experienced dual personalities (i.e., MPD) and who also had seizure disorders (1986). For both clients, these physicians observed that "a major seizure preceded the shift from" one personality to the other (p. 471).

One of my MPD respondents told me that a seizure plus a cardio-respiratory arrest preceded a switch that brought back all of the alters from an out-of-body experience in which the alters and the ISH all agreed never to come back to that body. (This 31-year-old body was about to undergo yet another in a seemingly endless series of abusive familial cult rituals that had been going on since her birth, and all of the alters and the ISH were out of body waiting in a dark void to die.)

Having reviewed the literature from 1892 until 1985 and finding a number of other cases similar to their own (i.e., Mesulam, 1981; Schenk and Bear, 1981), Benson, Miller, and Signer suggested there

may well be "a causal relationship between epilepsy and dual personality" (1986, p. 471). They concluded "that seizure disorder is present in more individuals with multiple personality than would be anticipated statistically" (p. 471). The suggestion is that these are temporal lobe seizures. And John Hughes, Donald Kuhlman, Christopher Fichtner, and Michael Gruenfeld cited a study of 30 persons with MPD, "4 of whom had epileptiform discharges and 4 of whom had clinical seizures" (1990, p. 200).

In his review article of the MPD literature, Thomas Fahy wrote the "EEG is of little help in distinguishing MPD from temporal-lobe epilepsy, since a high rate of non-specific abnormalities has been detected in MPD patients, most commonly, bilateral temporal-lobe slowing" (1988, p. 599).

Finally, with respect to MPD, Fiore (1988) noted that electroshock has been used, presumably with some success, to treat MPD. While the reasons for the efficacy of this treatment are unknown, perhaps electroshock is not too dissimilar to the natural biological cerebral discharge seen in other MPD clients such as those reported by Benson, Miller, and Signer (1986).

My discussion here of temporal lobe involvement should not be interpreted as an endorsement of a reductionist explanation of NDEs or MPD. What I am suggesting is the commonality of this region of the brain for MPD and NDEs and that there may well be an interfacing of the neuroanatomy with the soul/spirit/consciousness that leaves the NDEr's or the MPD client's body during an OBE.

### **Child Abuse**

For some time there has been a suspicion of an association of child abuse with NDEs. NDEr Barbara Harris wrote about her own experiences in this regard (Harris and Bascom, 1990), and I have elsewhere cited the relationship between sexual abuse and NDEs in three women (1987-88). Recently, Ring and Christopher Rosing found that NDErs reported "a higher incidence of child abuse and trauma" (1990, p. 211).

Ring and Rosing observed "there is a clear-cut and consistent tendency for NDErs to report a greater incidence of childhood abuse and trauma" than for their control group of persons interested in NDEs but who never had an NDE themselves (1990, p. 219). This finding was true for physical mistreatment, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and a negative home atmosphere. These authors went on to say that "one significant predisposing factor" for subsequent NDEs

"may well be the presence of relatively high levels of childhood abuse and trauma" (1990, p. 220). The significance of this statement with respect to MPD will become abundantly clear as I now turn to the literature on multiple personality disorder.

The connection between child abuse and MPD has been known for a long time. Most MPD experts believe a very high percentage of MPD clients were severely traumatized as children. Colin Ross, Scott Miller, Pamela Reagor, Lynda Bjornson, George Fraser, and Geri Anderson (1990) reported that 95% of their 102 MPD cases had a history of abuse. These authors went on to say that for 4 large studies in addition to their own, 60–82% of the MPD respondents were *physically* abused; 68–90% had been *sexually* abused; and more than 88% had endured *one or both* forms of abuse. Therefore, one condition some NDErs and many individuals with MPD have in common is that they both unfortunately have been the victims of sexual and/or physical abuse as children.

### Near-Death-Like Experiences

Some persons with MPD seem to have had near-death-like experiences. For example, Allison wrote his MPD client Carrie told him that once when she was a girl she was unable to breathe due to a boy sitting on her chest. She reported she became "semiconscious" (1980, p. 71), and Allison said that at this point "she created a male aspect" (p. 71), that is, a male alter.

Fiore mentioned one of her MPD clients, Anne, who had surgery as a child. The client said that "I'm barely alive" during this operation, and it is at this moment that she believes spirits came in and took over her body (1988, p. 62). Anne was subsequently in a coma for several months and not expected to live. Daniel Keyes's biography of Billy Milligan, who had MPD, noted that Billy nearly died when he was a month old due to an obstruction in his throat; Keyes wrote there was a growth blocking Billy's esophagus (1981).

The above examples suggest a near-death *encounter*, if not a near-death *experience*, for these respective clients. But perhaps the most remarkable example comes from Fiore (1988). She began her book with the following:

The nurse said "DOA." I was above my body in the Emergency Room looking down. It was too gory, I didn't want to be saved . . . a bad accident. I heard this terrified scream for help. I thought, Maybe I can help somebody, they can't help me here. I went to help. There was a

young boy . . . being operated on. It was the spirit screaming, not the body. The body was on a table, but six feet above that was the boy . . . but he was like me. He was panicky, so I talked to him as a friend . . . and I asked him to talk to me. He finally calmed down. (p. 1)

The boy in the above anecdote 46 years later came to Fiore about his MPD, and one of his alters was the man who helped calm him down as a child.

### Conclusion

We have seen a number of similarities between near-death experiences and multiple personality disorder. Both share out-of-body experiences with concomitant loss of pain. We have found examples of persons with MPD traveling to a transcendental environment, which, if not identical, is then remarkably similar to that of NDErs. We observed they both may share a similar divine presence, the Higher Self for one and the Inner Self Helper for the other.

We noticed the similarities of leaving and reentering the body, of the "silver cord," of locomotion by floating, of communicating telepathically, of a distortion in the sense of time, of the availability of helping spirits and light beings, of the presence of psychic abilities, and of encountering spheres of light and energy. We also found a similarity in groups of entities that may be present for some NDErs and which the MPD literature calls "alters."

The description of "hell" for a few individuals with MPD was strikingly similar to that described by Grey in her pioneer work on negative NDEs. We found indications of temporal lobe involvement, epilepsy, and seizures in both groups of respondents. And we noted the unfortunate commonality of child abuse as an antecedent for most cases of MPD and at least some cases of NDEs.

What are we to make of these numerous similarities? Perhaps we are looking at the very same process or way in which the universe (if you will) works: with unbearable pain or trauma may come a release from the physical body into a timeless dimension that is pain-free, peaceful, and loving. If needed, helping spirits appear and/or one's Higher Self or Inner Self Helper steps in to assist the host personality or the birth soul/spirit/consciousness. The release of the host personality or soul/spirit/consciousness from the body may sometimes be triggered by a seizure in the temporal lobes, or a temporal lobe seizure may precipitate the switching of one personality to another, in effect releasing the

host spirit to allow a new alter or spirit to come in to, or to take control of, the body. Perhaps the energy, which is said to be the "real me" of NDErs or the alters in MPD, resides in the temporal lobe until an out-of-body experience takes place. The overwhelming pain of child abuse may have led to an OBE or multiple OBEs in childhood, thereby teaching the person how to leave the body when unbearable pain is subsequently experienced as an adult.

In other words, maybe the near-death experience and multiple personality disorder are not disparate experiences. Perhaps they are variants of the very same experience, variations of the same phenomenological pattern.

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# Near-Death Experiences Among Survivors of the 1976 Tangshan Earthquake

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**ABSTRACT:** We interviewed 81 survivors of the severe earthquake in Tangshan in 1976 and found that 32 (40 percent) reported near-death experiences (NDEs) as measured by Greyson's (1983) NDE Scale. The great majority of these NDEs were of the cognitive and transcendental types, and our observations were somewhat different from those of Greyson (1985) in the United States and of Pasricha and Stevenson (1986) in India. These differences suggest that the components, sequences, and types of NDE might differ with race, religion, psychological and cultural background, and kind of near-death event.

Near-death experiences (NDEs), profound subjective events experienced on the threshold of death, have been reported by people who have been seriously injured or ill but unexpectedly recovered, and by people who have anticipated imminent death in potentially fatal situations but escaped from that danger (Feng and Liu, 1986; Greyson and Stevenson, 1980). They represent a type of mental action during the process of dying distinct from other phenomena in the psychology of death.

In December 1987, we conducted a study of 81 survivors of the severe earthquake that had occurred 11 years earlier in Tangshan, China. This paper reports the results of that study.

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## Sample

All subjects in this study were patients in the Paraplegic Convalescent Hospital in Tangshan. They had been severely crushed and in a near-death state when their homes were destroyed in the earthquake, but had been rescued from the danger. We randomly selected 100 patients as investigative subjects. Of those, 19 patients were uncooperative or refused to answer questions.

Of the remaining 81 patients who participated in the study, 43 (53 percent) were men and 38 (47 percent) women. While 5 patients (6 percent) had recovered from their physical injuries, 22 (27 percent) remained partially paraplegic and 54 (67 percent) completely paraplegic.

## Method

In addition to reviewing patients' medical records, we administered to these subjects a questionnaire that contained general demographic and sociological items and questions regarding personality, beliefs and attitudes, and NDE phenomena, including Bruce Greyson's (1983) NDE Scale. Each subject was interviewed by both of us simultaneously, to assure consistency in the ratings, for a period of 3-4 hours. Comparison of our individual ratings on a small preliminary sample of subjects revealed a 95% consistency rate.

The section of the questionnaire regarding NDE phenomena consisted of a list of 40 items that we derived from previous reports in the literature and from consultation with experienced investigators. We asked subjects whether or not they had experienced during the earthquake any of the 40 items comprising our phenomenological section. These included (1) feeling estranged from the body, or not recognizing it, as if it belonged to someone else; (2) unusually vivid thoughts; (3) lack of emotions; (4) unusual bodily sensations, such as numbness or heat; (5) life seeming like a dream; (6) a feeling of dying; (7) a feeling of peace or euphoria; (8) a life review or "panoramic memory"; (9) thinking unusually fast; (10) time seeming to go faster than usual; (11) an out-of-body experience; (12) sensation of the world being exterminated or ceasing to exist; (13) a sense of weightlessness; (14) one's self feeling unreal; (15) senses unusually vivid; (16) sudden understanding; (17) seeing deceased or religious figures; (18) thoughts or movements not under conscious control; (19) a feeling of being pulled or squeezed; (20) an unearthly realm of existence; (21) being controlled by an external

force; (22) senses blurred or dull; (23) ambivalence about death, that is, wanting to proceed into an afterlife but feeling reluctant to leave the earthly world; (24) feeling detached from one's surroundings; (25) being judged or held accountable; (26) the world seeming unreal; (27) time seeming to slow down or stop; (28) visions of the future; (29) a feeling of cosmic unity; (30) a tunnel-like dark region; (31) thinking blurred or dull; (32) a border or point of no return; (33) an unnaturally brilliant light; (34) a feeling of having been dead; (35) extrasensory perception; (36) meaningful sounds; (37) a feeling of joy or pleasantness; (38) meaningful visions; (39) feeling of being a different person or a different kind of person; and (40) unusual scents.

The NDE Scale (Greyson, 1983) includes four distinct components, which in our questionnaire were as follows: the cognitive component included items 8, 9, 10, and 16; the affective component, items 7, 29, 33, and 37; the paranormal component, items 11, 15, 28, and 35; and the transcendental component, items 17, 20, 32, 36. On the basis of each subject's report, each item was scored as absent (0 points) or as present to a lesser or greater degree (1 or 2 points). A subject was judged to have had an NDE if his or her experience scored 7 or more points on the NDE Scale.

## Results

### *Demographic and Sociological Data*

Subjects' ages at the time of the earthquake averaged 31.4 years (S.D.=11.3), with a range of 12 to 60 years. Four subjects (5 percent) were younger than 18 years old at that time; 51 (63%) were between 19 and 30 years old; and 26 (32 percent) were older than 30 years. Of the 81 subjects, 79 (98 percent) were Han people and 2 (2 percent) were Moslems.

Forty-two subjects (52 percent) were married, and 39 (48 percent) single. Six subjects (7 percent) had no formal education; 19 subjects (23 percent) had an elementary education; 33 (41 percent) had attended junior middle school; 18 (22 percent) had attended senior middle school or obtained secondary technical education; and 5 (6 percent) had higher education.

Eleven subjects (14 percent) were administrators or technicians; 27 (33 percent) were laborers; 12 (15 percent) were peasants; and 31 (38 percent) were housewives or educated youth who had followed Chair-

man Mao's instructions to settle down in the countryside to become the new class of peasants.

### *Personality*

On the section of the questionnaire describing personality prior to the earthquake, 18 subjects (22 percent) were classified as introverted, 37 (46 percent) as extroverted, and 26 (32 percent) as neither, as determined by Gueng Yue-Xian's Personality Inventory. Forty-seven subjects (58 percent) had a change in personality after the earthquake: 2 subjects (2 percent) became unrealistically optimistic, 26 (32 percent) became more irritable, and 19 (23 percent) became more docile. These changes were comparable for male and female subjects.

### *Altered Consciousness*

Some confusion or altered state of consciousness at the time of the earthquake was described by 37 subjects (46 percent). That confusion lasted less than an hour for 19 subjects (23 percent of the total), between 1 and 3 hours for 7 subjects (9 percent), and more than 3 hours for 11 subjects (14 percent). Thirty-seven subjects (46 percent) reported having been awakened by the earthquake.

### *Beliefs and Feelings About Death*

Belief in spirits, ghosts, God, and destiny prior to the earthquake was reported by 22 subjects (27 percent).

Regarding their views of death at the time of the earthquake, 25 subjects (31 percent) reported painful feelings about death; 11 (14 percent) reported joyful feelings; 24 (30 percent) felt they would enter an unearthly realm, reunite with deceased relatives, or exist in some other form after death; and 21 (26 percent) had no thoughts about death or believed death would be the end, like a light going out.

Twenty-three subjects (28 percent) had had some knowledge of NDEs prior to the earthquake; and 3 (4 percent) had had a prior close brush with death, though none recalled a prior NDE.

Sixty subjects (74 percent) reported indifference to their experience during the earthquake or spoke freely about it; 18 (22 percent) reported fear or pain surrounding their memories; 2 (2 percent) reported rage;

and 1 (1 percent) only spoke of it grudgingly. Memories of the experience remained fresh at the time of the interview, 11 years later, or clearer than memories of other events at the same time, for 67 subjects (83 percent).

### *NDE Phenomenology*

The number and percent of subjects who reported experiencing each of the 40 NDE phenomenological items are listed in Table 1.

### *NDE Scale*

Of the 81 subjects, 9 reported having experienced none of the 16 items on the NDE Scale, and therefore had scores of 0. The remaining 72 subjects who reported some phenomena had a mean NDE Scale score of 9.88 (S.D. = 2.79). Thirty-two subjects (40% of the 81 subjects) had NDE Scale scores of 7 or greater, indicating the occurrence of an NDE.

The number of subjects whose responses were rated 2, 1, and 0 for each item on the NDE Scale are listed in Table 2. The highest scoring items were thought acceleration (mean score = 0.64), life review (mean = 0.58), and time acceleration (mean = 0.53) in the cognitive component; peace (mean = 0.56) in the affective component; out-of-body experience (mean = 0.51) in the paranormal component; and visible spirits (mean = 0.56) in the transcendental component.

The mean score of the 81 subjects on the cognitive component was 2.04; on the affective component, 1.01; on the paranormal component, 1.17; and on the transcendental component, 1.30.

Following Greyson's (1985) categorization of NDEs into types based on the component with the highest score, we classified the 32 NDEs as cognitive in 11 cases (34%), affective in 1 case (3%), paranormal in 4 cases (13%), and transcendental in 9 cases (28%); the remaining 7 cases (22%) we could not classify unequivocally.

### *Correlates of NDEs*

For each of the 40 individual NDE phenomenological items, we looked for significant associations with demographic and personality traits, circumstances of the near-death event, and aftereffects of the

**Table 1**  
**Frequency of NDE phenomenological items**

| <i>Item</i>                                       | <i>Subjects reporting<br/>item (n = 81)</i> |
|---|---|
| 1. feeling estranged from the body                | 55 (68%)                                    |
| 2. unusually vivid thoughts                       | 53 (65%)                                    |
| 3. loss of emotions                               | 51 (63%)                                    |
| 4. unusual bodily sensations                      | 49 (60%)                                    |
| 5. life seeming like a dream                      | 47 (58%)                                    |
| 6. a feeling of dying                             | 46 (57%)                                    |
| 7. a feeling of peace or euphoria                 | 42 (52%)                                    |
| 8. a life review or "panoramic memory"            | 41 (51%)                                    |
| 9. thinking unusually fast                        | 41 (51%)                                    |
| 10. time seeming to go faster than usual          | 35 (43%)                                    |
| 11. an out-of-body experience                     | 35 (43%)                                    |
| 12. sensation of the world being exterminated     | 34 (42%)                                    |
| 13. a sense of weightlessness                     | 32 (40%)                                    |
| 14. one's self feeling unreal                     | 27 (33%)                                    |
| 15. senses unusually vivid                        | 23 (28%)                                    |
| 16. sudden understanding                          | 23 (28%)                                    |
| 17. seeing deceased or religious figures          | 23 (28%)                                    |
| 18. thought, movement not under conscious control | 23 (28%)                                    |
| 19. a feeling of being pulled or squeezed         | 23 (28%)                                    |
| 20. an unearthly realm of existence               | 21 (26%)                                    |
| 21. being controlled by an external force         | 19 (23%)                                    |
| 22. senses blurred or dull                        | 19 (23%)                                    |
| 23. ambivalence about death                       | 19 (23%)                                    |
| 24. feeling detached from one's surroundings      | 18 (22%)                                    |
| 25. being judged or held accountable              | 18 (22%)                                    |
| 26. the world seeming unreal                      | 17 (21%)                                    |
| 27. time seeming to slow down or stop             | 16 (20%)                                    |
| 28. visions of the future                         | 14 (17%)                                    |
| 29. a feeling of cosmic unity                     | 13 (16%)                                    |
| 30. a tunnel-like dark region                     | 13 (16%)                                    |
| 31. thinking blurred or dull                      | 13 (16%)                                    |
| 32. a border or point of no return                | 12 (15%)                                    |
| 33. an unnaturally brilliant light                | 12 (15%)                                    |
| 34. a feeling of having been dead                 | 12 (15%)                                    |
| 35. extrasensory perception (ESP)                 | 11 (14%)                                    |
| 36. meaningful sounds                             | 10 (12%)                                    |
| 37. a feeling of joy or pleasantness              | 8 (10%)                                     |
| 38. meaningful visions                            | 7 ( 9%)                                     |
| 39. feeling of being a different person           | 5 ( 6%)                                     |
| 40. unusual scents                                | 1 ( 1%)                                     |

**Table 2**  
**NDE Scale Scores**

| <i>Item</i>                      | <i>Subjects (n = 81) scoring:</i> |                |                 |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
|                                  | <i>2 points</i>                   | <i>1 point</i> | <i>0 points</i> |
| <b>Cognitive component:</b>      |                                   |                |                 |
| time acceleration                | 8 (10%)                           | 27 (33%)       | 46 (57%)        |
| thought acceleration             | 11 (14%)                          | 30 (37%)       | 40 (49%)        |
| life review                      | 6 ( 7%)                           | 35 (43%)       | 40 (49%)        |
| sudden understanding             | 0 ( 0%)                           | 23 (28%)       | 58 (72%)        |
| <b>Affective component:</b>      |                                   |                |                 |
| peace                            | 3 ( 4%)                           | 39 (48%)       | 39 (48%)        |
| joy                              | 0 ( 0%)                           | 8 (10%)        | 73 (90%)        |
| cosmic unity                     | 3 ( 4%)                           | 10 (12%)       | 68 (84%)        |
| brilliant light                  | 1 ( 1%)                           | 11 (14%)       | 69 (85%)        |
| <b>Paranormal component:</b>     |                                   |                |                 |
| extrasensory perception          | 4 ( 5%)                           | 7 ( 9%)        | 70 (86%)        |
| unusually vivid senses           | 2 ( 2%)                           | 21 (26%)       | 58 (72%)        |
| precognitive visions             | 0 ( 0%)                           | 14 (17%)       | 67 (83%)        |
| out-of-body experience           | 6 ( 7%)                           | 29 (36%)       | 46 (57%)        |
| <b>Transcendental component:</b> |                                   |                |                 |
| unearthly realm                  | 2 ( 2%)                           | 19 (23%)       | 60 (74%)        |
| meaningful sounds                | 2 ( 2%)                           | 9 (11%)        | 71 (88%)        |
| visible spirits                  | 22 (27%)                          | 1 ( 1%)        | 58 (72%)        |
| point of no return               | 12 (15%)                          | 0 ( 0%)        | 69 (85%)        |

experience, by assigning numerical values to categorical variables (e.g., "yes"=1; "no"=0) and using correlation coefficients. Since this procedure required 40 interdependent tests of significance for each variable, we used the Bonferroni procedure to correct error risk (Grove and Andreasen, 1982). This technique permits the assignment of levels of significance for tests of multiple hypotheses such that the probability of *at least* one hypothesis being accepted, when in fact the null hypothesis is true for all cases, can be set at an acceptable level. Using the Bonferroni inequality, we set the significance for each individual correlation coefficient at  $p=.001$ , which corresponds to an overall error rate of  $p=.04$  for the family of 40 NDE items.

Using that criterion for statistical significance, none of the 40 NDE phenomenological items was associated with subjects' age; gender; marital status; educational level; occupational level; introversion

versus extroversion; presence of brain trauma; belief in spirits, ghosts, God, or destiny; or prior knowledge of NDEs.

Alteration in state of consciousness ( $r=.3850$ ) and duration of loss of consciousness ( $r=.3981$ ) were each significantly associated with only one phenomenological item: a feeling of having been dead.

Remaining paraplegic after the earthquake was significantly associated with only one phenomenological item: strange bodily sensations ( $r=.3839$ ).

Views of death were assigned the following numerical values: 3=belief in an unearthly realm after death; 2=joyful feelings about death; 1=painful feelings about death; and 0=belief that death is the end of existence, or no thoughts about death. Higher scores on this scale of views of death were significantly associated with two phenomenological items: sudden understanding ( $r=.3733$ ) and experiencing an unearthly realm of existence ( $r=.4402$ ).

## Discussion

Since Swiss geologist Albert Heim published a collection of NDEs among falling mountain climbers (1892), many scholars have investigated near-death phenomenology. NDEs seem to follow a consistent pattern, have extensive paranormal contents, and positive transformative effects (Feng, 1986; Feng and Liu, 1986; Greyson and Stevenson, 1980).

### *Contents of the NDE*

Our subjects reported NDE phenomenological items not mentioned, or rarely mentioned, in NDEs reported from other countries: sensations of the world being exterminated or ceasing to exist, a sense of weightlessness, a feeling of being pulled or squeezed, ambivalence about death, a feeling of being a different person or a different kind of person, and unusual scents. The predominant phenomenological features in our series were feeling estranged from the body as if it belonged to someone else, unusually vivid thoughts, loss of emotions, unusual bodily sensations, life seeming like a dream, a feeling of dying, a feeling of peace or euphoria, a life review or "panoramic memory," and thinking unusually fast.

These are not the same phenomenological features most commonly found by researchers in other countries. Greyson (1983) reported the

most common phenomenological features of American NDEs to be a feeling of peace, joy, time stopping, experiencing an unearthly realm of existence, a feeling of cosmic unity, and an out-of-body experience. Satwant Pasricha and Ian Stevenson (1986) reported that NDEs in India commonly included seeing a "being of light" or religious figure and being taken to another realm by a messenger and then "sent back." These differences in frequencies of phenomenological items might be associated with race or with religious and cultural background.

### *Factors Influencing the NDE*

Alterations in state of consciousness, duration of loss of consciousness, and prior views of death influenced the content of NDEs in our series. This suggests that physiological and psychological variables can influence NDE phenomenology. On the other hand, age, gender, marital status, educational and occupational level, personality, brain trauma, and prior knowledge of NDEs and belief in spirits, ghosts, God, and destiny did not significantly affect NDE contents.

### *Consequences of the NDE*

Greyson and Stevenson (1980) reported that attitude changes were common among NDErs who reported a feeling of being dead and a life review. Our study did not confirm that association. We did find that some subjects, interviewed 11 years after the earthquake, had changes in character.

### *Types of NDE*

Greyson (1985) reported that the nature of the near-death event may influence the type of NDE. He reported that NDEs were generally of the affective or transcendental type in circumstances in which death might have been anticipated, such as suicide attempts, exacerbations of chronic illness, or complications of surgery; but that in situations in which the NDE was sudden and unexpected, roughly equal numbers of experiences were cognitive, affective, and transcendental.

The near-death event in our study was a sudden and unanticipated earthquake. Of those NDEs that we could categorize as to type, the

most common type was cognitive, followed by transcendental, and only one NDE was of the affective type. This distribution of types differs from that reported by Greyson (1985) for unexpected events in that we found virtually no affective experiences. The preponderance of cognitive NDEs in our series supports the argument (Stevenson and Greyson, 1979; Greyson, 1985) that such experiences are more common in sudden and unexpected events.

### Conclusion

Near-death research has practical significance for social medicine and clinical psychiatry (Feng, 1987); NDEs appear to exert positive transformative effects once subjects are out of danger. The phenomenological content of the NDE furthermore has implications for psychology, sociology, and eschatology, as well as medical and other sciences. Our study was preliminary and exploratory, and dealt with the results of one specific calamitous near-death event; hence we must be cautious about generalizing from these data to other populations. We intend to pursue these investigations with other high-risk populations to eliminate the biases inherent in the present sample.

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# Angels in Near-Death Experiences

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**ABSTRACT:** The literature on near-death experiences (NDEs) contains no substantive discussion of angels in NDEs, even though there are references to angels in several studies of these experiences. In this article I identify angels in NDEs and describe their functions in the NDE based on published NDE accounts. I conclude that angels are personages with whom the NDEr does not usually recall having previous acquaintance. Angels serve as guides, messengers, or escorts in the NDE.

References to angels in near-death experiences (NDEs) are found in several studies of the subject. Angels were referred to as "beings of light" by some near-death experiencers in Raymond Moody's book *Life After Life* (1975); in fact, Moody described the being of light as one of 15 elements in the NDE. In Moody's first case of a childhood NDE, a 9 year old boy was met on the other side by a group of angels whom he described as having no wings, glowing, and seeming to love him very much (Moody and Perry, 1988). Kenneth Ring (1982) cited the NDE of a man who came close to dying as a result of being ill during a tooth extraction, and took a trip to heaven where he saw angels.

In one of the most extensive narratives they received in their national survey of NDEs in the United States, George Gallup, Jr., and William Proctor (1982) related the account of a nurse who described angels holding hands to form a stairway to heaven. Once she reached

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the top of this stairway she met another angel who suggested to her that she ask the Lord to let her go back to raise her child. In their comments on the extradimensional beings in this NDE, Gallup and Proctor differentiated between the hosts of anthropomorphic angels who held hands to form a stairway for her up to heaven, and the head angel of sorts who acted as spokesperson for the others and who explained to her some of the things that were going on and gave her some advice.

Craig Lundahl documented an account in which the NDEr recognized his guardian angel. The NDEr wrote: "My spirit left the body, and I could see it lying under the derrick, and at that moment my guardian angel, my mother, and my sister Ann were beside me. My mother died January 31, 1918, and my sister at the age of four years" (Lundahl, 1982, p. 172).

References to angels were mentioned in *Closer to the Light*, a book reporting the findings on childhood NDEs by Melvin Morse and Paul Perry (1990). In this book, Morse and Perry pointed out that many children describe guardian angels who are blond or "all white" who escort them to heaven. It was the NDE account of Katie that began Morse's fascination with these experiences, and led him to examine the testimony of young patients about their NDEs. In her NDE, Katie, a 9 year old girl, met Elizabeth, who seemed to Katie to be a guardian angel. Katie entered a tunnel that opened, and through the tunnel came Elizabeth, described by Katie as tall and nice with bright, golden hair. Elizabeth accompanied Katie up the tunnel, where she saw her late grandfather and met several other people, including two new friends. Later in this NDE, Elizabeth took Katie to meet Heavenly Father and Jesus.

Morse and Perry also described other children who encountered angels in their NDEs, including Dean, who was transported to heaven by an angel or someone whom he described as about seven feet tall with golden hair and wearing a long white gown with a simple belt tied at the waist; and Kurt, a 7 year old who saw angels in his NDE.

Through the centuries, in the Old Testament and the New Testament as well as in much of the religious literature outside the Judeo-Christian tradition, angels played important roles and ministered to many people. In Islam, the angel Gabriel revealed great truths to the prophet Muhammad. In the Bible, the same angel appeared to Mary, announcing that she was pregnant with the Son of God. Among the many angels in Judaism, one is believed to have brought the traditional mourning prayer, the Kaddish, to earth from heaven.

Buddhism, Hinduism, and Native American religions also teach of beings similar to angels, and they are found in such great Judeo-

Christian poetry as Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (c. 1300), Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387), John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* (1808-1832). The 18th century Swedish scientist, philosopher, and religious writer Emanuel Swedenborg, who went through the early events of death, also encountered beings whom he identified as angels (Moody, 1975).

The skepticism of our age has discouraged any belief in angels. However, recently angels have become a subject of growing fascination in America. Books on the subject have become bestsellers, including Sophy Burnham's *A Book of Angels* (1990), which was number one for 15 weeks in 1991 on the Washington Post bestseller list. Burnham's newly released book *Angel Letters* (1991) contains accounts from people of different faiths and cultures who say they have met angels. Burnham claims she has interviewed nearly 400 people in the last few years with similar claims of having met angels.

Angels in NDEs seem to have been taken for granted or even ignored by near-death researchers. In fact, they have received little more attention than mention by NDErs themselves. But there are so many accounts of angels in NDEs that it is impossible to dismiss them without consideration. Furthermore, there is no question that they do play an important role in many NDEs. The fact remains, however, that substantive discussion of angels is absent from the literature on the NDE. The purpose of this article is to identify who angels are and to describe their functions in the NDE based on published NDE accounts.

### **Who Are the Angels in Near-Death Experiences?**

Angels have been referred to as beings of light (Moody, 1975). In that book, Moody wrote that the being of light was the most incredible common element in the NDErs he studied. However, he stated that the identification of these beings seemed to vary with the NDEr's religious background. For example, Moody stated, a Jewish person might identify the being of light as an angel, whereas a Christian person might identify the being as Christ.

Gallup and Proctor (1982) found a relatively small 5 percent of those who had an NDE say they saw any lights at all. Although they felt that this light should not be regarded as typical or normative of NDEs, Gallup and Proctor nevertheless noted that 5 percent represented about a million adult Americans, and that is a substantial number of people to have had this type of experience. They pointed out that in almost every case where it was mentioned, the light became a very important part of the scene that the individual encountered. Gallup

and Proctor reported that sometimes the light reported was soft and comforting, and at other times it was brilliant and blinding; on occasion, the light was connected with some sort of being or a group of beings in the extradimensional sphere.

Michele Sorensen and David Willmore have interviewed many Latter-Day Saints, and found that that group generally describe "the being of light as a deceased family member" (1988, p. 48). Sorensen and Willmore went on to say that in nearly every case the being was a guide.

So it appears that a being of light in the NDE may be identified as an angel or as a deceased family member, but there does not appear to be a published NDE account where the NDEr identified a being of light as *both* a family member and an angel. In other words, a deceased family member and an angel are not one and the same person, even though both may appear in a bright light. The following NDE account illustrates this point:

I had been gasping because of the pain, but somehow I just gave up and felt my last breath leave my mouth. At that instant, all the pain was gone, and I was flying at an enormous speed through darkness into a light. My flight stopped just with the darkness, and I gazed into the light, sensing the power that emanated from it.

My Grandmother appeared within this wonderful, pure light. She was smiling, totally at peace and harmony with herself and her surroundings; an indescribable purity and unconditional love emanated from her and the light toward me. Grandma spoke no words. The love said everything. Her eyes were filled with deepest compassion, and I was swept with overwhelming longing to enter into the light with her. (Sorensen and Willmore, 1988, p. 37)

It is also entirely possible that an angel need not necessarily appear as a being of light, and apparently that has been reported also in NDE accounts. Of course, whether an angel appears as a being of light or not may depend on the circumstances of the occasion. Gallup and Proctor (1982) reported that 8 percent of their national sample, or nearly two million of the eight million adult Americans reporting an NDE, described another being or beings present during the NDE. Gallup and Proctor's NDErs sometimes referred to these beings as dead relatives and at other times as angels or Jesus Christ, and some described angels as personages who have a human appearance.

Who then are angels? They are identified by NDErs as personages with whom they were usually not previously acquainted, who may or may not appear as a being of light.

## Angelic Functions in Near-Death Experiences

A study of NDE accounts suggests three major functions of angels in NDEs: they perform in the capacities of guide, messenger, or escort. In every case the Gallup Poll research team encountered in their national study in which the NDEr encountered angels, the NDEr reported that those beings acted as guides, messengers, or protectors (Gallup and Proctor, 1982). I will describe each of these roles and illustrate them with NDE accounts.

### *Guide*

A guide may be described as one who leads or directs others and in the process may explain points of interest. One NDEr described the angel who guided him through a death experience in these words:

It was between 10 and 11 o'clock that a visitor suddenly made his appearance in the room, and standing by the couch on which I lay, placed his hand on my head and asked if I was ready to go. I answered, "Yes"; and just at that instant I seemed to stand upon the floor, my body lying on the bed. I looked around to see if my father could see us, but he seemed to have been too interested in reading to have noticed us. We started off on our journey through space, seemingly with the rapidity of lightning. I asked my guide who he was. He answered he was one of the guardian angels sent to bring the dead. We soon reached a place where was congregated a great number of people—something similar to a market day in the old country. They seemed to have gathered for some purpose. I asked my guide what place this was, and he answered, "That is the place where all your forefathers have gathered together, and are waiting for two missionaries." There seemed to be a stand erected close by for the missionaries to preach in. They came as it were directly; part of the congregation were noisy and inclined to be troublesome. I asked my guide who these missionaries were, and he merely answered, "The old man is the Apostle Matthias." I understood by this it was the Apostle Matthias who had filled the place of Judas Iscariot who betrayed the Savior, and the young man, he further said, "was an apostle from America who had lately been killed there. . . ."

My guide then introduced me to the apostles by bowing his head, which was returned by them. No hand shaking took place; the elder apostle said to me, "Would you as soon go back, for it seems to fall to redeem your forefathers?" I answered, "Yes, but my lungs are gone." He replied, "It is easy to grow new lungs in a man; if you will go your guide will attend to this." I answered, "I will go."

With a bow we started to return and, seemingly, but a short space of time elapsed ere we reached my home, and standing by the bed, where my body lay, my guide touched my hands, the spirit entered my body at that instant, the blood commenced to circulate warmly through my veins, and in a few minutes I felt my lungs expanding. (Heinerman, 1978, pp. 108-111)

In this NDE account, the angel as guide came for the NDEr and took him through space. When the angel was asked who he was, he answered that he was one of many guardian angels with the responsibility to bring the dead, presumably to the other world. Even though the angel identified himself as a guardian angel, which may be his appropriate title in the other world, he seemed to act primarily as guide, as evidenced by his taking the NDEr to a place and explaining what place it was, and naming or describing the missionaries. Later, he introduced the NDEr to the missionaries, one of whom called the angel a "guide." Finally the angel returned the NDEr to his earthly home and used his power to return the NDEr's spirit to his body. In this NDE account, the NDEr's lungs were eventually healed, suggesting that the angel had it within his power to heal the NDEr's lungs as he was told to do.

### *Messenger*

Some angels may serve to carry a message to the NDEr. In one account, a woman became seriously ill during her pregnancy and began to miscarry:

My body stayed right there, but my spirit started leaving. My husband began slapping my face, yet I couldn't respond. I knew that I was passing on, and I watched myself leaving.

Suddenly I started going through dimensions. There is no way to describe what happened. I was moving through our physical dimension into another one. The dimension did not stay in one shape or size, and I was aware that I was moving through circles and triangles and squares toward a bright light. I was so taken in by the sizes of things that I don't remember any colors.

Before I reached the light, I recalled my life in a sudden flash. It was the most totally exciting, fantastic thing I have ever seen. I saw the time I was brought from heaven to the earth by angels to a body, how I was received at the hospital, and how my parents loved me. From that day until the present, I saw everything that ever happened to me in my life. It was all in an instant. . . .

I experienced this judgment as I was nearing the bright light. Then I saw someone coming toward me, with many other people behind him. He was an angel who had come to get me. I don't know who he was, but he was someone who had always helped me. We had been familiar with one another for a very long time, and it would have been ridiculous to make an introduction at this point. I was excited and wanted to express my happiness at the relief I felt from the cares of the world, but I was told that I had made some promises and commitments and had been set apart to do some work before this world was. I had accepted a responsibility that would have a great missionary effect. (Sorensen and Willmore, 1988, pp. 89-95)

In this NDE account, the personage in front of many other people was identified by the NDEr as an angel who came to get her. The commentary suggests that the major task of this angel was to give the NDEr a message about her promises and commitments to do some work. The angel did not take her on a tour in the other world explaining different points of interest or introducing her to other personages, as was the case in the first NDE account.

### *Escort*

Finally, some angels have as their function to guard or protect the NDEr. This function is portrayed in the following account of an NDEr who contracted yellow fever:

Soon after that, my spirit left the body; just how I cannot tell. But I perceived myself standing some four or five feet in the air, and saw my body lying on the bed. I felt perfectly natural, but as this was a new condition I began to make observations. I turned my head, shrugged my shoulders, felt with my hands, and realized that it was I myself. I also knew that my body was lying, lifeless, on the bed. While I was in a new environment, it did not seem strange, for I realized everything that was going on, and perceived that I was the same in the spirit as I had been in the body. While contemplating this new condition, something attracted my attention, and on turning around I beheld a personage, who said: "You did not know that I was here."

I replied: "No, but I see you are. Who are you?"

"I am your guardian angel; I have been following you constantly while on earth."

I asked: "What will you do now?"

He replied: "I am to report your presence, and you will remain here until I return."

He informed me, on returning, that we should wait there, as my sister desired to see me, but was busy just at that time. Presently she came. (Johnson, 1920, p. 451)

In this NDE account, the angel said, "I am your guardian angel; I have been following you constantly while on earth." This statement suggests that people may be watched over and even shielded from danger by what may be called guardian angels; however, it also suggests that the responsibility of a guardian angel is performed primarily outside the NDE. It appears in this case that the function of the guardian angel changed to that of an escort during the NDE, in which the guardian angel met the NDEr as he died, escorted him as he entered the afterlife, and reported his presence to the appropriate authority.

### Conclusion

In many NDEs, angels play a significant role in fulfilling the purposes of the NDE, especially in those instances where the NDEr encounters the other world. Although many people today no longer believe in the ministry of angels, there is evidence that they appear in NDEs and fulfill needed functions of guide, messenger, and escort.

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## BOOK REVIEW

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**Many Lives, Many Masters, by Brian L. Weiss.** New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1988, 219, pp, \$8.95 (pb)

"Nothing in my background had prepared me for this. I was absolutely amazed when these events unfolded" (p. 10). So writes the *magna cum laude* graduate of Columbia University and 1970 M.D. recipient from Yale University School of Medicine who, after ten extremely successful years of traditional practice in psychiatry, stumbled onto past life therapy. In this book, Brian Weiss recounts both the external and internal aspects of the process that was involved in his "discovery"—and glad I am that he did.

His story chronicles, once again, how in the face of seemingly compelling evidence yet another paragon of the Western scientific paradigm throws off the cloak of that world view and emerges with the broader and deeper perspective of the transpersonal. His process is made, for me, even more convincing by the skepticism and psychological struggle that accompanied his transformation, and his lack of proselytizing upon achievement of it. He presents the evidence and, while undauntedly expressing his own conclusions, overtly expresses respect for the reader to draw his or her own.

His process began when "Catherine" showed little improvement during 18 months of traditional psychiatric treatment for anxiety, panic attacks, and phobias. These symptoms had plagued her since childhood

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but had become much more acute just prior to seeking therapy with Weiss in 1980. In a further attempt to find the source of her symptoms, which he believed must have been rooted in early childhood trauma, they began hypnosis.

In an early session, regressed to the brink of her first childhood verbalizations, she revealed no trauma that would account for her symptoms. Clinging still to the psychodynamic assumption that a preverbal trauma may have constituted the root problem, he suggested to her to "go back to the time from which your symptoms arise." When she again began to speak, he was at first confused, then increasingly amazed at his growing realization that she seemed to be speaking from a past life.

In this and subsequent hypnotic sessions she revealed pieces of perhaps as many as twelve past lives. The recollection and working through of traumatic episodes from these past lives proved both etiologically meaningful to her present-life symptoms and therapeutically beneficial in the removal of them. But for Weiss, the even more profound aspect of these sessions came when Catherine, still under hypnosis and "between lives," began to channel personal, cosmological, and spiritual material to Weiss himself, from a small group of spirit entities who called themselves "the masters." Catherine post-hypnotically remembered her past life recollections but had total amnesia for the purportedly channeled material. This corroborated the masters' assertion that the past life material was for Catherine's development, the channeled material for Weiss's.

Weiss clearly describes his struggle to reconcile these new experiences with the traditional scientific world view that had, up until that point, served him exceedingly well. Some particularly compelling evidence would be required to shake the foundation of so deeply entrenched a world view. For Weiss, that evidence came in the form of seemingly paranormal material. I respect Weiss's predominant stance of openness to that material, yet caution in jumping to conclusions about it. Yet my only lasting dissatisfaction with the book rests with what, for me, was insufficient critical analysis of that material.

For example, in one case Catherine channeled highly personal information about Weiss's family to him from one of the masters. This information included a description of the congenital heart disorder that had been responsible for the death of Weiss's infant son nearly ten years prior to Weiss's relationship with Catherine, along with Weiss's deceased father's Hebrew name that had been modified to create a name for Weiss's daughter.

Weiss briefly examines, then dismisses, the possibility that Catherine could have acquired this information through normal means. His description of Catherine as a sincere and artless young woman, too preoccupied by her own symptoms to be designing an elaborate hoax, certainly has merit. But the fact that she reportedly worked in the same hospital as he and that she had a "close friendship" with at least one of his medical colleagues complicates the picture. Has Weiss never confided such information to a colleague? Do hospital personnel never gossip about such things?

The puzzle is further complicated by the fact that Weiss "slightly changed" Catherine's identify to ensure confidentiality. It is not clear whether changes were made in these aspects pertaining to her associations with people who might know more personal facts about Weiss. In any case, my own skepticism leads me to question—even doubt—the source of some of the seemingly paranormal revelations. This is not to imply that Catherine necessarily engaged in intentional deceit; she may have recalled under hypnosis information that she had consciously forgotten ever having all-too-normally acquired.

More difficult to dismiss is an incident that grew out of Catherine's increasing extrasensory perception (ESP) during waking consciousness. At one point, having spent a day at the racetrack, she produced winning tickets for every horse race that had been run. Would a hospital laboratory technician of seemingly modest means go to the expense of placing a bet on every horse that ran, just to be able to produce all the winning stubs? Catherine reportedly went through the exercise of betting on every winning horse to convince her father of her growing paranormal powers. Weiss reports that he saw the winning ticket stubs; I wish that he had also sought to verify personally with Catherine's father exactly *how* Catherine came by those stubs.

Although approximately 70 percent of my conviction is swayed by the weight of Weiss's evidence, the other 30 percent is painfully aware of the long history of hoaxes that has plagued the field of parapsychology. It is not so much that I disbelieve the veracity of Catherine's paranormal abilities as that I would have liked Weiss more thoroughly to have researched and discussed alternative explanations for those abilities, in order to provide more forcefully rational arguments against the likelihood of those alternatives.

Of particular interest to the readers of the *Journal* are Catherine's accounts of death from her many past lives. As Weiss himself points out, Catherine seemed to have acquired a different belief system in each of her past lives, yet the process of death was identical with each

life and very much in line with what near-death experiencers (NDErs) report. However, Catherine's channeling revealed a more detailed description of existence between lives than any NDEr, to my knowledge, has ever described. I found this to be thought-provoking reading.

Also of interest is the parallel between some of the changes Catherine apparently experienced as a result of her past life therapy and those reported by NDErs subsequent to their NDEs (Ring, 1984). Most noteworthy were her loss of fear of death and her increased ESP and intuitiveness. Also evident were her increased self-esteem and sense of inner peace. It was not Weiss's purpose to examine these and other possible parallels, such as changes in values and spiritual orientation. But Catherine and others like her might constitute excellent subjects for the research protocol developed by Ring (1984). A tantalizing hypothesis is that the changes he documented among NDErs might be characteristic of anyone who has had a profound transpersonal experience (Holden and Guest, 1990).

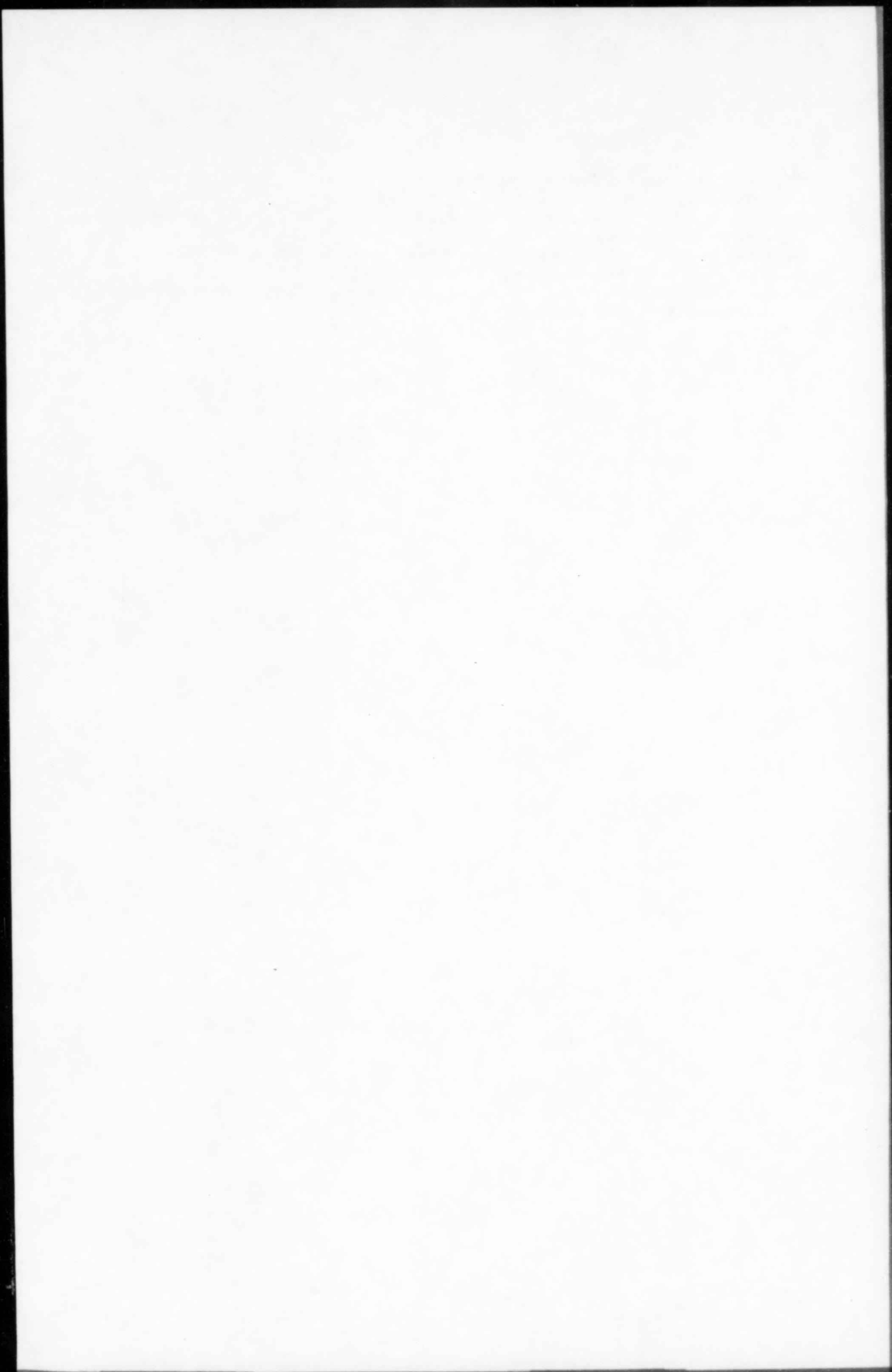
I believe that even if I were not a psychotherapist and a parapsychological researcher, but were "merely" a person whose occasional unorthodox experiences had awakened in me a curiosity about the transpersonal, I would have found this book to be compelling reading. Weiss succeeds in writing in a manner that can be understood easily by a reasonably educated lay person, yet will be stimulating to even the most experienced professional.

Prior to reading Weiss's book, I had read Ian Stevenson's *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (1966) and Roger Woolger's *Other Lives, Other Selves* (1987)—the latter reviewed in this Journal by Stevenson (1990) and by Arthur Hastings (1990). The three books together provided a synergy to my thinking about reincarnation, past life therapy, and related issues. Yet, personally, I found Weiss's book to be the single most stimulating and convincing treatment of these topics. At least in part, this is because his book covers not only those topics but also his personal paradigm shift. For me, that kind of personal transformation is becoming "an old, old story" that I love to hear yet again.

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## Letters to the Editor

### NDEs and the Pursuit of the Ideal Society

To the Editor:

In your Foreword to the Winter 1991 issue of the Journal, you invited other scholars to pursue Allan Kellehear's (1991a) lead regarding the near-death experience (NDE) providing a pattern for the ideal society. Presumptuously, I will claim to be a scholar in order to accept that invitation. My involvement with NDEs dates back to the 1981 beginnings of the International Association for Near-Death Studies, which may imply some credentials, but in another area, as a lifelong Swedenborgian, Kellehear's article and the five subsequent commentaries cry out to me for a different response.

Kellehear based his article on reports by experiencers of a wondrous realm of love, harmony, and peace, and suggested that these transcendent societies provide models from which we mortals can create a utopian civilization on earth. The unbelievably widespread near-death experience has seldom been claimed as an extended adventure into heaven and/or hell. The brief glimpse and usually deliberate choice to return was compared to a traveler's arriving at the airport but reem-barking before really seeing the sights. No matter how attractive the brief stay, few would consider the NDE as fully representing an eternal life in paradise—or the unattractive alternative.

As I pointed out a decade ago in this Journal (Rhodes, 1982), few accounts compare with the supernal experiences of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), who moved freely between mortal consciousness and exploration of the spiritual world awaiting us all after death. His bestseller *Heaven and Its Wonders and Hell* carried the subtitle *From Things Seen and Heard*. This astonishing claim was made by Europe's foremost scientist, respected for his keen analytical mind and impeccable honesty, and still ranked among the leading philosophers of all

time. His assertions of having explored the spiritual world have been cited by leading NDE commentators, and his descriptions dating back to the 1770s are strikingly consistent with the testimony of countless modern experiencers.

Swedenborg gave fascinating descriptions of visits into the realm beyond death, reporting lengthy conversations with the inhabitants he called "angels" as well as their counterparts. He described banquets, clothing, houses and palaces, meadows and flowers. He did explain how the heavens are arranged and divided into harmonious kingdoms, and presented a logical account of how newly arrived spirits actually choose which "society" they will inhabit in order to dwell among spirits like themselves.

As Kellehear declared, these spiritual communities are wondrously perfect places in which to live, even to eternity, and they may therefore offer ideal models for humanity's aspirations to create a utopia. Swedenborg's followers really do hope that their governments and the lives of the inhabitants here on earth will come as close as possible to the ideals Swedenborg described. They would hope, as did Kellehear in his rejoinder, that such images will "play a role in the task of personal and social change" (1991b, p. 135).

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## Kenneth Ring's Swan Song

To the Editor:

This letter was motivated by, but is not about, Kenneth Ring's apparent swan song in a recent issue of this Journal, in which he

wrote: "my work in near-death studies was now concluded . . . I am inclined to believe [this decision] had something to do with the depth of insight as well as the extended character of the [near-death] accounts I have quoted here" (Ring, 1991, p. 34). In that article, Ring provided moving accounts of four personal near-death experiences (NDEs), each magnificently told in the NDEr's own words.

That Ring has finally seen the light (hardly a pun in this business) is to be applauded. On the other hand it doesn't make sense that after ten years of research a near-death guru's decision to quit should come from something NDErs have been talking about all along; surely I missed something in his explanation? His decision to exit near-death research came at exactly the juncture at which a researcher might best be entering, which brings me to the point of this letter.

I believe the paramount goal of near-death research only begins, not ends, with intimately presented word-pictures of spiritual encounters. The publication of these encounters serves as prefatory grounding—an introduction, not a conclusion—for those who need to record next what they have or have not done with life in fulfillment of a pledge made on the higher plane, a pledge all NDErs contract for, whether or not consciously remembered.

My suggestion is for research into life after life-after-life on a grand scale quite beyond what has already been done in limited sample sizes. I'd like to see study of life after the NDE given time and energy expenditures equal to those previously accorded the spiritual encounter itself. Some who know say that one result might well be a clear understanding of why we have near-death visions.

Early on we would learn that "experiencer" is an inadequate and ambiguous descriptor. As an alternative, NDEr and author P. M. H. Atwater (1988) paved the way by explicitly covering the field with a better one-word descriptor: "survivor."

Of course, Buddha, Jesus, Martin Luther, Mahatma Gandhi, and others have survived a spiritual vision that was nothing if not a painful stumbling for survival in a world in which they found themselves to be "different." And every one knows what they did with their post-vision lives.

Near-death survivors, and many UFO abductees, are in the same boat in coming back to Earth never again to be the same. Yet despite the fact that the spiritual trauma inherited from a near-death vision inherently precludes business as usual, many NDErs seem to stagnate spiritually within the coverup of a variety of pretexts. Studied as a group, their post-NDE lives have much to offer the world.

My qualifications for suggesting greatly expanded and entirely new researches into the NDE's impact come partly from my own life—not the pre-NDE life I surrendered but the new post-NDE life I entered, the one in which I chose to become a stumbling wanderer in order to fulfill the contract I had made but couldn't name until long after I first cut adrift. The other source of my qualifications for asking to be heard stems from chance encounters here and there with kindred spirits to near-death survivors, especially those pathetic souls who in allegiance to their former constraints try to force-fit what they have become into the previously familiar space they had once occupied.

All too often those encounters with kindred spirits were moments of bitter failure due to my lack of talents with which to be of convincing help. But maybe near-death researchers can help by broadcasting interesting reports of benefit to impacted survivors. To begin with, I'd like to see some explanation of why some of us left all we were or had in order to wander around unfathomably in a world now new to us. Of the ten to twenty million Americans estimated to be near-death survivors, is it possible I am the only crazy in town? If not, how many others might there be? What are our commonalities, before, during, and after the NDE? Questions about effects rather than causes will escalate when other NDErs are invited to contribute their ideas for research. Trust us to know intuitively what you need to explore.

Ultimately these proposed studies of near-death survivors' *afterworld* journeys will offer more enlightenment than would studies of near-death survivors' *otherworld* journeys. I hope that IANDS will one day find itself generously offering the Journal or an alternate publication's pages to the full-bore accounts of NDEs' impact as written by those who were abruptly hurled into their new lives. It is inevitable that if done in depth via a thousand "amazing grace" narratives complete with post-NDE accounts, major surprises are in store.

A thousand narratives? More likely ten thousand times a thousand potential stories from souls waiting in line to tell their all! But not via self-defeating questionnaires; after all, what could be more individually emotional than death, except a return from death? How then can we compress our experiences into sanitized form responses? True, data in prose form require much more effort to evaluate, but as some have belatedly discovered, that's the only way to get it all.

You have to wonder, though, if only four top-notch recitals prompted one researcher to jump bail, what might a few dozen or a hundred do to the others?

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[Editor's Note: The Journal has always been willing to publish NDErs' accounts of their "afterworld" journeys, such as Sally Leighton's "God and the God-Image: An Extended Reflection" (Volume 9, Number 4), John Wren-Lewis's "The Darkness of God: An Account of Lasting Mystical Consciousness Resulting from an NDE" (Volume 5, Number 2), and Patrick Gallagher's "Over Easy: A Cultural Anthropologist's Near-Death Experience" (Volume 2, Number 2). We welcome further accounts from NDErs written in an appropriate style, and second Vincent Luciani's call for researchers to take cues from these accounts. In addition, *Vital Signs*, IANDES's quarterly newsletter, regularly publishes NDErs' accounts written in a shorter and less academic format.]

### Near-Death Accounts as Therapy

To the Editor:

In January 1991 I was diagnosed with breast cancer. The lump was as big as a golf ball. The malignancy had spread through 12 lymph nodes. My doctor told me that I would need a modified radical mastectomy and intensive inpatient chemotherapy. He said that, even after all that, the extensive node involvement put me at high risk for recurrence. "If it does recur," he said, "the most likely places are the brain, the liver, or the lungs."

Of course, this scared me. I wondered, "Will I die? And, if I do die, what will it be like?" I lay in bed at night unable to sleep. There welled up within me a smothering fear that in my final moments I would feel my body stiffening and lose my ability to see, hear, and speak, being left in isolated pain as I realized my own annihilation. I had to leave the lights on; darkness reminded me too much of the darkness of death. I had always thought I believed in God and probably some kind of a

hereafter. Now, I asked myself what evidence I had ever truly seen and whether there might be a reason for hope.

During my chemotherapy, a friend and professor, James Pace, came to pray with me every week. A hospice chaplain, Pace shared some of the inspiring experiences of his dying patients. After I left the hospital, he showed me a number of books and articles relating near-death accounts. I began to discover the near-death experience (NDE) as a scientific phenomenon. Of course, I had heard of deathbed visions previously, almost as a kind of folklore. But I had never really taken them seriously. I had no idea that they were so prevalent, nor that they had been well-documented and researched.

Soon I began to seek out NDE literature on my own, everything I could find in my university's library, including the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* and books by Kenneth Ring, Raymond Moody, Bruce Greyson, Michael Sabom, and Ian Stevenson. A few sources pointed out differences among experiences. But to me, the core elements appeared strikingly similar, as did the after-impressions of the experiencers. These were no chaotic, disjointed images or incoherent thoughts, as might be expected with hallucinations. There was definitely *something* going on here.

Intrigued, I began to ask friends and acquaintances if they had ever experienced an NDE. Some had; others referred me to their friends who had NDE stories to tell. Everyone was willing to talk; every story was beautiful. As I listened to these accounts and read NDE literature, I felt my questions about death were being answered by the only persons who knew the truth: those who had been there. Years ago, as an English major, I had read fictionalized accounts of NDEs, such as in Leo Tolstoy's (1899/1960) short story, "The Death of Ivan Ilych." Since I had never known anyone who admitted to having had an NDE, it seemed like simply a nice way to end a story. "How wonderful it would be if such things really happened," I thought. Now, here were people telling me they do—and with regularity! Fear was replaced by excitement.

At this time, I am doing quite well. My CAT scans and left-breast mammograms are clear. My cell counts are back to normal. Of course, I am still at high risk for recurrence. Every two months, when I go for my check-ups, I know something could show up. If cancer should be found, I would still be initially shaken; but I think my adjustment would be much easier. That paralyzing fear that haunted me the first six months of this year I do not believe will ever come again. Death to me now is not what it was a year ago. Now when I imagine that last moment, I see light. I feel peace, love, and tranquility.

Of course, I realize the beautiful visions with their tunnels, lights, and departed loved ones could be, as Ernst Rodin (1984) and Tillman Rodabaugh (1985) warned, induced by anoxia or brain chemicals or simply a psychological response to trauma. I realize those lights could go out and nothing come back on again. But that knowledge does not diminish the fact that the transition to whatever lies beyond this life will probably be the reality of a sweet dream rather than a living nightmare. It does not diminish the hope that has given me strength.

And the hope offered by the NDE is infectious. When these stories are shared with others who are afraid or grieving, it seems to provide them peace also. For instance, I recently met a woman whose 23-year-old daughter had committed suicide one month before our conversation. This woman was tormented because some persons in her church had told her that her daughter would go to hell. I showed her an article by Ring and Stephen Franklin (1981-81), in which the NDEs of suicide attempters were described as being beautiful and tranquil, like any other NDE. After reading the article, she told me that she felt greatly relieved, and added, "God bless you."

I hope that the psychiatrists, physicians, nurses, and other health-care professionals who read this Journal will seriously consider exploring the use of NDE accounts with the seriously ill and grieving, as well as, certainly, dying patients and their families. I can attest to the inspiring, invigorating power of this "therapy." The ideal outcome in crisis is that one not only resolves the crisis, but emerges at a higher level of functioning. I *am* stronger and more confident than I was before my illness, because I have finally dealt with my fear of death, which, I realize now, had troubled me for many years, possibly even contributing to occasional mild depression.

Near-death accounts may not help every seriously ill patient. Those who are in denial, initially overwhelmed, or already coping well may not want or need to hear about these experiences. But for those like myself who acknowledge their diagnosis and are haunted by "worst-case" scenarios, these accounts are a true blessing. They give peace of mind and renewed purpose, and allow life to move ahead. I am no longer plagued by fear, but I still enjoy reading NDE accounts. They always make me joyous!

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