

Journal
of
Near-Death Studies

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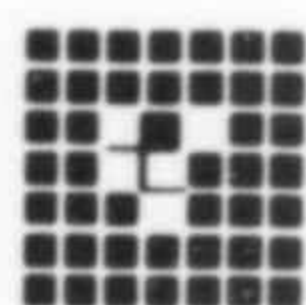
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JOURNAL OF NEAR-DEATH STUDIES (formerly ANABIOSIS) is sponsored by the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS). The Journal publishes articles on near-death experiences and on the empirical effects and theoretical implications of such 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.

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Editor's Foreword

After almost two decades of intensive research into the familiar beatific near-death experience (NDE), attention is now being increasingly directed toward its less publicized terrifying counterpart. While cardiologist Maurice Rawlings had written as long ago as 1978 about "hellish" experiences his patients had encountered, his book included too many Biblical references and too few data to capture the interest of other researchers. Those investigators who did try to explore frightening NDEs usually came up empty-handed—in retrospect, perhaps unappreciative of how much more difficult it might be to share a terrifying experience than a blissful one.

Over the past few years, however, with growing public acceptance of near-death phenomena, increasing numbers of experiencers have been coming forward with their frightening NDEs, and increasing numbers of researchers have been writing about them, trying, as did P. M. H. Atwater in a Guest Editorial in the Spring 1992 issue of this Journal, to delineate their relationship to the more commonly reported peaceful experience.

This issue of the Journal is devoted to an examination of theoretical and ontological understandings of frightening NDEs. Our lead article, by social psychologist and near-death studies pioneer Kenneth Ring, presents a speculative theoretical model for the three types of frightening experience outlined in a 1992 article by myself and pastoral counselor Nancy Evans Bush. Philosopher and religious scholar Christopher Bache then critiques Ring's model and expands parts of it, proposing a more comprehensive theory of the frightening NDE as rooted in the perinatal level of consciousness; and Bush argues that Ring's model, being reductionistic, ignores the meaning and value of these experiences and denies them their legitimate ontological status. Ring concludes this discussion with a recapitulation of the common ground among these divergent viewpoints, and proposes empirical studies that would help answer some of the theoretical questions they raised about frightening NDEs.

We end this issue with my review of respiratory and massage therapist (and NDEr) Barbara Harris's *Spiritual Awakenings*, a guidebook for coping with and learning from the difficulties that often follow an awakening such as an NDE.

Bruce Greyson, M.D.

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Solving the Riddle of Frightening Near-Death Experiences: Some Testable Hypotheses and a Perspective Based on *A Course in Miracles*

Kenneth Ring, Ph.D.
University of Connecticut

ABSTRACT: This article discusses three varieties of frightening near-death experiences (NDEs), as distinguished in the typology of Bruce Greyson and Nancy Evans Bush (1992). "Inverted" and hellish NDEs are analyzed in terms of the terror of ego-death that results in resistance to the experience and inability to surrender to it. The third kind, experiences of a "meaningless void," may reflect an "emergence reaction" to inadequate anesthesia. Testable hypotheses stemming from this analysis are presented, and the relevance of the conception of reality based on teaching found in *A Course in Miracles* for understanding NDEs is indicated. Finally, the ontological status of both transcendent and frightening NDEs is briefly considered.

In 1978, a dark cloud of chilling testimony began to penetrate into the previously luminous sky of reports of near-death experiences (NDEs). Maurice Rawlings, a cardiologist, in his book *Beyond Death's Door* (1978), claimed to have found many cases of persons who described frightening or even hellish encounters in their near-death episodes and suggested that their hitherto unnoticed existence was largely attributable to the fact that most near-death researchers had interviewed their respondents too long after the actual near-death

Kenneth Ring, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Connecticut. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Ring at the Department of Psychology, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269-1020.

crisis to detect these unsettling features. By then, Rawlings asserted, the mechanisms of repression and selective forgetting would already have obliterated all traces of such deeply traumatic visions.

Although questions were immediately raised about the validity of Rawlings' conclusions, because of his flawed methodology and concerns about his tendentiousness owing to his strongly held fundamentalist religious views (Sabom, 1979, Ring, 1980), there now seems to be little doubt that Rawlings was right about one thing: in the words of Margot Grey, "negative encounters, while infrequent, do however definitely exist" (1985, p. 56). Indeed, in addition to Grey's findings and an early survey of such cases by George Gallup (Gallup and Proctor, 1982), there has recently been a spate of articles (Atwater, 1992; Greyson and Bush, 1992; Rogo, 1989) that have called our attention to the indisputable occurrence of frightening NDEs and have urged that further research be devoted to exploring the factors that cause these strikingly different deviations from the classic form of the radiant NDE.

The only one of these papers actually to present new findings on these experiences for us to ponder, however, was the one by Bruce Greyson and Nancy Evans Bush (1992) that summarized the results of an informal collection of 50 cases of frightening NDEs culled from the authors' files of letters and from responses to a request for such experiences that they had placed in an NDE newsletter. The findings from their survey allowed Greyson and Bush to propose a tentative typology of frightening NDEs, but, as they admitted, most of the obvious questions about these experiences remain unanswered. Are certain persons especially likely to have frightening NDEs, for example, and if so, what are their defining characteristics? Or, on the other hand, are there certain conditions associated with the near-death event itself that conduce to these episodes? And, regardless of the factors that prompt frightening NDEs, do the aftereffects of these experiences, as Greyson and Bush hinted, differ significantly from those of the usual ecstatic NDE, and if so, precisely how? All these questions, which should clearly be at the heart of any systematic inquiry into these disturbing experiences, have yet to be explored in any careful way.

As a prelude to such research, this paper offers some testable hypotheses pertaining to these fundamental issues. In my discussion of these hypotheses and their rationale, I will make use of the tripartite typology of frightening NDEs suggested by Greyson and Bush (1992). They distinguish three principal varieties of such experiences, which I will call "inverted" NDEs, hellish NDEs, and experiences of a "meaningless void."

"Inverted" NDEs

What I am calling an "inverted" NDE is merely an experience that has exactly the same *form* as the classic NDE, but is perceived in terms of a *negatively-toned affective filter*. That is, the person reports all the usual events—having an out-of-body experience, going through a tunnel, encountering a light, and so on—but responds to these features from a standpoint of fear rather than peaceful acceptance. Greyson and Bush gave a number of examples of this kind in their paper, as did Grey (1985) in her chapter on the subject where she also, by the way, classified frightening NDEs in a fashion similar to that of Greyson and Bush.

Why should some persons experience these common features of NDEs as frightening? Although not many cases of "inverted" NDEs have been described in the literature, nevertheless the answer already seems clear, and Greyson and Bush themselves have put their finger on it (p. 99): The person who responds this way is likely to be terrified by the prospect of losing one's ego in the process. As a result, the experience of dying is resisted strenuously rather than being surrendered to. It is this very resistance that creates the filter of increasing fear that comes to pervade the entire experience.

The cases Greyson and Bush provided to illustrate "inverted" NDEs offer abundant testimony for this kind of reaction among their respondents. Indeed, the sense of wanting to remain in control and consequently of reluctance to give oneself over to the experience of dying are among the defining features of these accounts, as I read them. One of the women they quoted, for example, said that during her OBE, "I became frightened and I remember strongly the feeling I didn't like what I saw and what was happening. I shouted [within herself], 'I don't like this!'" (p. 99). Another woman, describing a childhood NDE, averred, "That night I was picked up, unwillingly, by a lady. . . . She carried me in her arms . . . swiftly taking me somewhere I did not want to go . . . and kept trying to explain that I had to go, and nothing could prevent it, no matter how much I didn't want to leave" (p. 99). A third instance of this same unwillingness to surrender came from the account of a 64 year-old man who related that as he felt himself flying through a funnel and nearing its end, "I felt that I did not want to go on. . . . I vividly remember screaming, 'God, I'm not ready; please help me'" (p. 100).

In my own research I have also encountered a few cases of this kind. One, where the terror of ego-death became self-evident to the respondent herself, involved a woman I'll call J.T. J.T. had been living in

Central America in 1979 when she became ill and had her NDE. She was being driven to a local first-aid station but before she arrived, she had already begun to feel herself close to death. As she described her experience to me, she said that at the beginning

A snowballing effect occurred. As all of my energy started rolling inward, I was frantic. It was living hell and I never experienced such terror in my life. It was the death of my ego. It was accompanied by an incredible and totally consuming terror. Also, great struggle and upheavals were involved in the passing away of my ego. . . . Most of my memories of this juncture are taken up with my struggle and terror. The image I retain is the simile of a small child being dragged somewhere against his will and kicking and screaming the whole way. (Ring, 1984, p. 9)

What makes this case particularly instructive, however, is that J.T. also became simultaneously aware of a detached "witness consciousness" within herself, which was simply noting this struggle dispassionately, and as she experienced the crossing over into death itself, she said,

Someone was watching all this and that someone was still me, and yet the me, as I was accustomed to think of me, was dead. The me (SELF) was watching it all and had witnessed the death of me (ego). It was all very confusing and yet very clear at the same time. (Ring, 1984, p. 9)

It's just here that we find a new element entering into these "inverted" NDEs, but one that is certainly implied by our hypothesis. Look at what happens next, when J.T. surrenders:

Concurrent with this realization, I surrendered to the force and powers that be, I gave up and "said" in effect, "OK, I give up, I'll go quietly and peacefully. . . ." I felt a loving presence surrounding me and in me. The space was composed of that presence of love and peace. . . . It was a lovely place to be; very peaceful, total harmony, everything was there. . . . (Ring, p. 9)

In short, at this point, the "inversion" rights itself, and the experience then *reverts* to the classic form of the NDE which, indeed, J.T. went on to have, including a very powerful life review.

Letting go, releasing oneself completely to the numinous power of the NDE, appears therefore to be the key to the prison door of fear that dominates these experiences and thus the means of escaping what now appears to be only the initial dread of an "inverted" NDE. This implies,

of course, that experiences of this type can be expected to convert themselves into the familiar classic form of the NDE if they persist long enough to allow the process of surrender to begin, or if the individual is simply overwhelmed by the intrinsic power of the NDE itself.

Other researchers concerned with frightening NDEs have in fact already noted exactly this sequence of negative-to-positive in some of their cases of this kind. For example, in an early survey of NDEs in the American Northwest, James Lindley, Sethyn Bryan and Bob Conley (1981) noted, "Most negative experiences begin with a rush of fear or panic or with a vision of wrathful or fearful creatures. These are usually transformed, at some point, into a positive experience in which all negativity vanishes and the first stage of death (peacefulness) is achieved" (p. 113). Greyson and Bush also provided two vivid examples of this sort in their paper where their introductory remarks clearly show that their interpretation of these cases is virtually identical to the one advanced here: "Since this type of distressing experience shares many descriptive features of the peaceful type, it is reasonable to regard it as a variant of the prototypical near-death experience. Supporting that view are the following examples of phenomenologically prototypical but distressing experiences that convert to peaceful ones once the individual stops fighting the experience and accepts it" (p. 100).

NDE researchers are by no means alone in positing a direct connection between the initial response—resistance versus acceptance—of the individual and the way in which a transcendental experience is processed. Explorers of the world of psychedelic voyages have also found the same relationship as that discussed here in connection with "inverted" NDEs. Since it is well known (Grof and Halifax, 1977; Ring, 1988; Rogo, 1984, 1989; Siegel and Hirschman, 1984) that psychedelic experiences can sometimes afford experiences that are virtually indistinguishable from NDEs, these observations are most pertinent to and provide an additional source of support for my hypothesis.

One of the earliest investigators to speak to this point was the man whom many regard as having helped to launch the modern psychedelic movement through his writings about his own experiences, Aldous Huxley. In one of his first books on the subject, *Heaven and Hell* (Huxley, 1963), Huxley, in addressing mescaline experiences, presciently remarked,

... (N)egative experiences may be induced by purely psychological means. Fear and anger bar the way to the heavenly Other World and

plunge the mescaline taker into hell. . . . Negative emotions—the fear which is the absence of confidence, the hatred, anger or malice which exclude love—are the guarantee that visionary experience, if and when it comes, shall be appalling. (p. 137–138)

Recently, there has been additional evidence from psychedelic research that bears out Huxley's claim and its implied counter-instance. Igor Kungurtsev is a Russian psychiatrist, now living in the United States, who has done important research on alcoholism using the dissociative anesthetic, ketamine. Using it in an alcoholism treatment facility in Russia in doses ranging from one-tenth to one-sixth of the amounts standard in surgery, Kungurtsev (1991) found that many of his patients reported experiences with many features of classic NDEs. According to him,

At the beginning of ketamine sessions, people often experience the separation of consciousness from the body and the dissolving of the body ego. For many patients, it is a profound insight that they can exist without their bodies as pure consciousness or pure spirit. . . . They describe an ocean of brilliant white light, sometimes a golden white light, which is filled with love, bliss and energy. After coming back to ordinary consciousness, they feel sure that they have had contact with a higher power . . . and now believe that some part of them will continue to exist after death. (Kungurtsev, 1991, p. 4)

What is particularly relevant to us here, however, is Kungurtsev's further observation that in these ketamine induced NDE-type episodes, there was a

correlation between the type of personality and the type of experience under the influence of ketamine. People who are very controlled and have difficulties letting go . . . often have negative experiences with ketamine. For them, the dissolving of the individual sense of self is horrible. For other patients who are more relaxed and are able to surrender . . . the experience is usually blissful, even ecstatic. (1991, p. 4)

To sum up these remarks about "inverted" NDEs, then, the hypothesis offered here, supported by the data I've cited, suggests that the primary reason for the occurrence of these experiences is the fear unto terror associated with the prospect of imminent ego-death. Thus, those individuals who are unable to let go, or who enter the experience with undue apprehension for whatever reason (great situational fear, personal rigidity, massive religious indoctrination concerning the exis-

tence of a literal hell, etc.) would be expected to undergo "inverted" NDEs, at least to begin with. A further implication of this hypothesis, as we have seen, is that such experiences may, in time, lose their horrific grip and convert themselves into the more common beatific NDE. A detailed study of a further collection of such cases, then, should show this negative-to-positive sequence in many instances of extended NDEs.

Hellish NDEs

Episodes of so-called hellish NDEs are in my opinion, and Grey's (1985) as well, merely more intense versions of "inverted" NDEs in which there is also a predominance of imagery suggestive of an archetypal hell and associated demonic entities. Psychodynamically, the underlying factors prompting these experiences should be quite similar to those of "inverted" NDEs since the former would seem to be largely culturally-derived elaborations of the latter.

One difficulty with this argument, however, is that it fails to square with one of the observations made by Greyson and Bush about this type of frightening NDE. My position implies that like "inverted" NDEs, hellish instances also ought to convert into the positive variety with time. Nevertheless, Greyson and Bush contradicted this assumption in saying that the typical hellish NDE "appears not to convert to a peaceful one with time" (p. 105). Still, as they also concede, their sample of cases here is the smallest of any of their three categories (they do not say exactly how many they have), and perhaps there are exceptions to their tentative generalization.

Indeed, as I will show, there do in fact seem to be such cases. Not only does Grey (1985, pp. 65-66) appear to provide an instance of this kind, but one of the most dramatically gripping NDE cases that I have yet encountered is a clear-cut example of one (Corneille, 1989). On June 1, 1985, Howard Storm, an art professor, found himself in Paris on the last day of a European tour he had been conducting for students. Suddenly, he screamed in pain and collapsed, the victim of a perforated intestine, which is often fatal. He was rushed to a hospital, but the necessary operation was delayed for many hours and Storm experienced pain so unendurable that, he said, had he had the means to kill himself, he would have. At one point in his ordeal, he found himself standing next to his physical body and, because he was an atheist and expected that death would be followed by the extinction of his consciousness, he was extremely baffled and disconcerted by this percep-

tion of undeniable reality. His wife and hospital roommate proving unresponsive to his pleas, Storm then found himself travelling through a dark region with a group of beings who had appeared benign at first, but who soon proved unrelentingly hostile. Eventually, they taunted Storm and then began beating and kicking him to the point where Storm felt physically annihilated, parts of his body having been severed. At this moment of complete despair and exhaustion, Storm heard a voice within him urging him to pray, but because of his life-long atheism, he rejected this action as completely unacceptable and contemptibly hypocritical. The voice continued to insist, however, and Storm ultimately yielded. His prayer, "Jesus, save me!" caused the hostile beings to disperse, but Storm still found himself utterly alone and now apparently abandoned by all. Not for long, however: a speck of light that soon grew into an enormous brilliant glow began hurtling toward Storm, engulfed him, and swept him up into what can only be described as a "heavenly journey" that Storm represented as a dazzling encounter with a divine power, in which he was flooded with intense, overwhelming love and cosmic knowledge. The experience had such a profound impact on Storm that he eventually left his position as an art professor and is now a minister in Ohio (H. Storm, personal communication, December 15, 1992).

I will examine some further aspects of Storm's case in a moment in order to show how it exemplifies my thesis about the effects of resistance to transcendental experience, but before doing so I want to draw on another case of an NDE to illustrate the nature of this conversion from hell to heaven. In this instance, however, it is a *fictional* NDE.

Jacob Singer is the protagonist of a film written by Bruce Joel Rubin—who also wrote the script for the popular film, *Ghost* (Rubin, Zucker, and Weinstein, 1990), which charts a comedic NDE course—called *Jacob's Ladder* (Rubin, Lyne, and Marshall, 1991). The film tells the story of a Vietnam veteran who is apparently the victim of post-traumatic stress disorder and who experiences a series of extremely frightening flashbacks, as well as highly disturbing and mentally destabilizing events in his personal life after the war, when he is again living in New York (Rubin's visual metaphor for hell). Ultimately, however, these terrifying visions and experiences culminate in an epiphany of light in which Singer is reunited with a son of his who had previously died. It is not until the end of the film that the viewer realizes with astonishment that the entire film has been told from the standpoint of Singer's NDE (he has actually died on a military operating table in Vietnam), and that what one has witnessed has been solely

the internal struggle of a man to become free of his own egoic attachments and fears.

Rubin, who spent two years living in the Orient, including three months at a Tibetan monastery, and who is very conversant with Eastern spiritual traditions, has furnished an extremely illuminating commentary about the main themes of his film (Rubin, 1990) that also lucidly sums up the argument I am making here. The following excerpt, then, will serve to encapsulate the general thesis I am advancing for both "inverted" and hellish NDEs:

To me, *Jacob's Ladder* was not simply about one man's struggle, but everyman's struggle. Learning to let go of life is, in biblical terms, the key to infinite life. I wanted to dramatize what Louis [the "angelic" chiropractor in the film, Jacob's "spiritual guide," as it were] tells Jacob when discussing the teachings of Meister Eckhart, the German mystic and theologian. Heaven and hell are the same place. If you are afraid of dying, you experience demons tearing your flesh away. If you embrace it, you will see angels freeing you from your flesh.

In Eastern religions, it is not the body that dies, but the illusion of the body. Death is an experience of ego loss. One loses the sense of separation between one's finite self and the larger universe. In Eastern terms, this separation is illusory and death is a disillusioning experience. It is a moment of truth. You become aware of your oneness with all existence, a oneness that has always been there.

If you are not prepared to be stripped of your illusions, death will be a painful process. If you have spent a lifetime angrily fighting with the world around you, you may not enjoy discovering that you have, in fact, been doing battle with yourself. You will fight this knowledge. You will see terrifying visions. Hell will become a real place.

If, however, you have loved life, if you have learned to remain open to it, then death is a liberation, a moment in which you recognize that there is no end to life. You are one with it in all its finite and infinite manifestations. (Rubin, 1990, p. 190-191)

This, of course, precisely traces the course of Singer's painful struggle and eventual realization in the film—and it also provides a good model for understanding actual cases like Storm's, to which we now return. When we come to examine Storm's resistance to the experience, we find that there were several strands all uniting to intensify his adamant stance. At the time, he was, as he later conceded, a materialist and atheist with a profound conviction that nothing survives death. His continued sense of personal (and embodied) existence was a great ontological shock to him, and itself caused him enormous distress and confusion. Moreover, he had been suffering from excruciating pain for many hours and only his inability to kill himself

prevented his suicide. American doctors later told Storm that his condition is normally fatal in five hours. Storm remained conscious and fought to stay alive for nine hours before he had his NDE, and survived until the evening of that same day before finally being operated upon (Corneille, 1989). Thus, a combination of extreme and unrelieved pain for many hours probably carried over into the beginnings of his NDE when his existential perplexities and denial only added to his distress. Storm certainly fits the picture Rubin describes of an embattled and tortured man, afraid of death, who finds that demons are tearing away his flesh.

Of course, Storm, like Rubin's fictional Singer, eventually submitted to forces greater than his own ego and allowed the onrushing light, previously walled off by his own fear and resistance, to penetrate into and pervade his conscious being. When I asked Storm to reflect on the meaning of his own experience, and especially what enabled him to find his way to the light, he gave a most insightful reply:

Psychologically I believe that I was unable to respond to the 'Light' (whether from within or without) because of my materialistic and self-centered world view. How is this form of narcissism eliminated so that one can have a transformative spiritual [experience]? It was necessary for me to be destroyed (ego obstruction) so that I could be reborn. (H. Storm, personal communication, August 21, 1991)

In the same letter, Storm also commented on his experience from another interpretative angle which I should at least mention here. Many readers will have already realized that experiences like Storm's, and Singer's for that matter, have many elements of the classic form of the hero's journey (Campbell, 1968) in which a descent is made into the underworld where menacing monsters and many life-threatening trials must be encountered and overcome before the hero can re-emerge, transformed, into the world of ordinary experience. This is also, of course, the shaman's initiatory experience, with its motifs of trial by ordeal and bodily dismemberment (Kalweit, 1988; Walsh, 1990). On these comparisons, Storm appropriately observed,

If you are familiar with Joseph Campbell's "the hero's journey," you will notice an extraordinary coincidence between my story and the archetypal myth. Or to put it simply, the ordeal precedes the reward. The ordeal in my OBE is consistent with traditional stories of seduction and torment by the "damned" or demonics. (H. Storm, personal communication, 1991)

These comparisons are not directly related to our testable hypotheses concerning these frightening NDEs, but they do help to give us a

larger context in which to understand their meaning. They also allow us to appreciate from still another perspective why we should expect to find terror giving way to transcendent realization if the experience continues long enough.

Finally, to round out these considerations on both "inverted" and hellish NDEs, I would like to offer an integrative theoretical approach that is based, loosely, on the teachings found in *A Course in Miracles* (1975). Although not directly testable as such, this framework is the most satisfactory—and simple—that I have yet come across as a means of understanding both positive and frightening NDEs. It also helps clarify something that hasn't yet been apparent in my discussion of these experiences, namely, why classic, radiant NDEs can be said to be "real" in a way that frightening experiences cannot.

According to the Course, what's real—and the only thing that's real—is what NDErs call "the Light," that is, that realm of total love, complete acceptance, and universal knowledge whose energetic source and essence is what most people would feel comfortable calling "God."

What's illusion, on the other hand, is your idea of yourself, your ego. The Course further asserts that the ego is rooted in fear and the illusion that it is separate (from God, the Light). Naturally, to most of us, our ego seems real enough, just as our body seems solid, but, on analysis, it can be shown to be merely a conditioned construction of mental habits, an interconnected tissue of thoughts, with no intrinsic reality of its own. From this point of view, you—as a separate, independent ego—don't really exist.

Thus we have two distinctly different realms:

God = Love = Reality itself
Ego = Fear = Illusion

Now, relating all this to the NDE, we can begin to see some important implications for frightening encounters—and their transformation. If, upon having an NDE, you are strongly identified with your ego and sufficiently attached to it that you cling to it like a drowning man might clutch a raft, you will naturally bring a great deal of fear into your experience (since the ego is predicated on fear). One is simply afraid "to go gently into that good night" since one's ego is really all one has to hold on to. Such an individual's emotional state will then tend to generate images consonant with that fear, which will only cause it to strengthen. The person will therefore continue to feel deeply menaced, as he or she is indeed threatened with extinction—as a separate ego. (The ego, of course, cannot recognize its own illusory nature; it's part of the illusion.)

If, however, the person begins to let go, or simply surrenders to the Light, what happens? Obviously, one then becomes permeated by the

Light—Reality itself. The ego is at least temporarily revealed to be an empty illusion whose function has only been to keep one screened off from the unconditioned splendor of one's being, which is not different from but in reality an aspect of the Light itself.

According to *A Course in Miracles*, then, it comes down to this: If you are still clinging to your little island of make-believe, your ego, when you enter into death, you will experience its own fear, perhaps to the point of terror. If you can let go, however, just as Rubin has argued, you will find yourself one with the Infinite Light of life. Most readers will now appreciate here the appositeness of the familiar biblical phrase, "perfect love casts out fear" (I John 4:18). Love and fear are incompatible states and are associated with two different and independent systems entirely. Love, in the sense the Course uses the term, and in the way most NDErs do, is an aspect of Reality itself. Fear is merely a response of an ultimately illusory ego. When love breaks through the illusion, fear vanishes and only the Light exists. Frightening NDEs, therefore, though they are by definition scary, aren't real. Only the Light of the NDE is. In fact, the only thing that is keeping you from the Light *right now* are your illusions about what's real.

Experiences of a "Meaningless Void"

When we come to the third and last type of frightening experience that Greyson and Bush delineated, we find ourselves in a very different realm from anything we have considered so far. Here the individual quickly is drawn into a meaningless void where he or she may be mocked and experience life not only as a cruel joke, but ultimately as an illusion. This situation is naturally perceived as intolerable, and the individual will struggle to prove that he or she *does* exist and that life *does* have meaning—but to no avail. In contrast to radiant NDEs in which time is absent, here the experiencer feels condemned to everlasting time in a meaningless universe. Greyson and Bush also pointed out that these experiences do not resolve themselves into positive ones in the way the previous types we have considered sometimes do.

A single extended example provided by Greyson and Bush may serve as a prototype here for this variety of frightening NDE. A twenty-eight-year-old woman, when giving birth to her second child, after hours of labor found herself in a frame of mind she described as "fearful, depressed and panicky." During the previous seven hours of labor, three pitocin drips had been started, and finally she was given nitrous oxide. She struggled against the mask, but was restrained and

eventually went under the anesthetic. She recalled travelling rapidly upward into darkness, "rocketing through space like an astronaut without a capsule," as she graphically put it (Greyson and Bush, 1992, p. 102). She then saw a small group of black and white circles, which were alternating in color and clicking as they did so. They jeered at the woman in a mocking and mechanistic fashion, and their message was, "Your life never existed. Your family never existed. You were allowed to imagine it. . . . It was never there. . . . That's the joke—it was all a joke" (p. 102).

The woman then proceeded to argue with these voices, protesting that she *did* exist, and that her family did, too, but the jeering continued and the woman's despair mounted. "This utter emptiness just went on and on, and they kept on clicking. . . . The grief was just wrenching. . . . Time was forever, endless rather than all at once. The remembering of events had no sense of a life review, but of trying to prove existence, that existence existed. Yes, it was more than real: absolute reality. There's a cosmic terror we have never addressed" (p. 102).

In commenting on experiences of this kind, Greyson and Bush casually mentioned that "the majority of our cases . . . occurred during childbirth under anesthesia" (p. 104). This finding, I think, may be a vastly important clue to the mystery of these experiences and deserves to be explored more fully in relation to other anesthetic and drug-induced experiences.

For example, Michael Sabom (1982), in his discussion of surgical NDEs, mentioned the work of another physician, Richard Blacher (1975), who had reported that patients who briefly awake under anesthesia only to find themselves paralyzed displayed a characteristic syndrome following their surgery consisting of "(1) repetitive nightmares, (2) generalized irritability and anxiety, (3) a preoccupation with death, and (4) difficulty . . . in discussing their symptoms, lest they be thought insane" (Sabom, 1982, p. 79). Sabom then went on to mention other cases of this kind, vouched for by other physicians, and concluded his commentary by quoting a letter from a physician who himself, as a patient, had had one of these anesthetically-induced episodes:

Nearly everyone has had a bad dream of trying to run away from some form of danger, but being unable to move. The dream usually ends with the sleeper waking. Though I was not asleep [during surgery] I endured the same terror, but the "dream" would not end. The sense of helplessness seemed to go on forever. (Sabom, 1982, p. 79)

In these remarks concerning inadequately anesthetized patients, Sabom gave us some reason to think that at least some of the elements

of this third type of frightening NDE may be attributable to the patient's response to the anesthetic itself.

And there is more evidence to support this claim. Ketamine, the dissociative anesthetic I mentioned previously in connection with Kungurtsev's work (1991) with chronic alcoholics, is a rapidly acting agent that produces an anesthetic state characterized by deep analgesia, though its physical side effects sometimes include hypertension and tachycardia (Martinez, Achauer, and Dobkin de Rios, 1985). Ketamine has seen widespread use in surgery, including obstetrics (Little, Chang, Chucot, Dill, Enrile, Glazko, Jassani, Kretchmer, and Sweet, 1972; Martinez, Achauer, and Dobkin de Rios, 1985).

Although, as we have seen, ketamine, at subanesthetic levels and with proper preparation of patients, can sometimes induce experiences that reproduce many of the essential features of transcendent NDEs, its use in conventional surgery has not been without problems. Specifically, what are called "emergence reactions"—confused and frightening sensations and hallucinations—are known to occur, sometimes in as many as one-third of the patients who receive it (Sklar, Zukin, and Reilly, 1981; White, Ham, Way, and Trevor, 1980; White, Way, and Trevor, 1982). Depersonalization is also apparently commonly reported (Collier, 1972). Finally—and significantly, in view of Greyson and Bush's remark about the predominance of anesthetically-related childbirth cases among this kind of frightening NDE—it is known that such reactions are more likely to occur in women (White, Way, and Trevor, 1982) and that, specifically, they are fairly common in women undergoing childbirth (Little, Chang, Chucot, Dill, Enrile, Glazko, Jassani, Kretchmer, and Sweet, 1972).

To see how closely such ketamine-induced experiences may sometimes parallel this variety of NDE, permit me to describe one of my own sessions with this agent. Some years ago, I was asked by an oncologist to take part in a pilot study he was then conducting to determine whether ketamine could be used to induce NDEs in terminally ill patients. His thinking was that, if this could be demonstrated, the use of ketamine with such patients might be justified on the grounds of its easing their fear of death. Although I have never had an NDE, the physician felt that because of my research on the subject I would be a good candidate for his preliminary research.

With a mixture of natural curiosity and some misgivings, I agreed. I was given a drip-injection so that titration could be performed. This enabled the physician to gauge my reaction to gradual increases of ketamine. I was asked to speak, as long as I was able, into a tape

recorder so that my subjective experiences to the drug could also be assessed at the time and not just retrospectively.

At the outset, the experience, though very strange, was not unpleasant, but I eventually reached a point where I became aware that I had lost all connection with, and belief in, life as I had previously understood it. I found myself in a soulless and totally mechanical universe, devoid of meaning. I remember I had the distinct and undeniable realization that human beings were nothing more than images projected onto a screen who had mistakenly come to *identify* with those images and had therefore naturally come to believe that they and other humans were real. But they were not—that was mere delusion. They were, in fact, no more real than dream figures. Furthermore, there seemed to be no one actually running the projector that produced those images. It was a motion picture without a director, and without a plot. I can still recall vividly my reaction of metaphysical horror, not just to my perception of these images, but to my unshakable insight that I was seeing into the stark and unutterably terrifying reality of the human situation.

When the ketamine wore off, I was still unable to dismiss what I had seen and experienced and was overcome by existential anguish. I remember clutching the elbow of the physician's assistant, both to take comfort in the sheer tactual sensation it provided, but also to try to reassure myself that the human body was real and substantial, and that I was, too.

Such existentialist nightmare visions, of course, are by no means unique to ketamine. Other drugs can also induce them, including lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD). One of the pioneers of LSD research, beginning in the mid-'50s in the former Czechoslovakia, is Stanislav Grof (1975, 1988), the well-known psychiatrist. Grof, for nearly two decades, made systematic observations of the effects of psychedelic agents as adjuncts to psychotherapy, and has elaborated a widely endorsed model among transpersonally-oriented practitioners and researchers in terms of which to understand the variety of experiences brought about by these substances. Particularly pertinent here is that portion of his model concerned with what he calls "perinatal experiences," that is, experiences that appear, in part, to mimic or reproduce aspects of the birth process in both their biological and symbolic aspects. It is not necessary, however, to accept Grof's own interpretation of these experiences in order to appreciate their relevance to the type of NDE under consideration here.

Grof divided these perinatal experiences into four distinct clusters, which he called "Basic Perinatal Matrices" (BPMs). It is the second of

these clusters, BPM II, that concerns us here. Of this matrix Grof wrote:

For a person experientially tuned in to the elements of BPM II, human life seems bereft of any meaning. Existence appears not only nonsensical but monstrous and absurd, and the search for any meaning in life futile, and, *a priori*, doomed to failure. . . . Another typical category of visions related to this perinatal matrix involves the dehumanized, grotesque, and bizarre world of automata, robots, and mechanical gadgets, the atmosphere of human monstrosities and anomalies in circus sideshows, or of a meaningless "honky-tonk" or "cardboard" world. . . . Another important dimension of [this matrix] is the feeling of pervading insanity; subjects typically feel that . . . they have gained the ultimate insight into the absurdity of the universe and will never be able to return to the merciful self-deception that is a necessary prerequisite for sanity. . . . Agonizing feelings of separation, alienation, metaphysical loneliness, helplessness, hopelessness, inferiority and guilt are standard components of BPM II. . . . Typically, this situation is absolutely unbearable, and at the same time, appears to be endless. . . . [Yet though] the individual trapped in [this] situation clearly sees that human existence is meaningless . . . [he] feels a desperate need to find meaning in life. (Grof, 1975, p. 116-120)

An illustrative instance of these insights—and of the tormentingly vain attempt to deny them—in an actual case is provided by this account:

At that point, I understood the existentialist philosophers and the authors of the Theater of the Absurd. THEY KNEW! Human life is absurd, monstrous, and utterly futile; it is a meaningless farce and a cruel joke played on humanity. . . . It seemed essential to me to find some meaning in life to counteract this devastating insight; there had to be something! But the experience was mercilessly and systematically destroying all my efforts. Every image I was able to conjure up to demonstrate there was meaning in human life was immediately followed by its negation and ridicule. . . . I felt caught in a vicious circle of unbearable emotional and physical suffering that would last forever. There was no way out of this nightmarish world. It seemed clear that not even death, spontaneous or by suicide, could save me from it. (Grof, 1988, p. 19-20)

What, then, is the import of these anesthetic and drug-induced experiences for our understanding of this third category of NDE? Because of the commonalities I have demonstrated, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that such experiences—though highly real—are not true NDEs as such but are essentially emergence reactions to inadequate

anesthesia, which may, as in the case furnished by Greyson and Bush, be further intensified by initial resistance and fear. Experiences with ketamine and LSD, outside of surgical contexts, can also induce such states, as we have seen, and Grof's comprehensive model easily subsumes them. Parsimony suggests, then, that we might best understand this variety of experience as reflecting mainly the effects of these anesthetic and psychedelic agents on human consciousness.

This assumption also appears to dovetail nicely with the tentative observations Greyson and Bush offered concerning the long-term effects of these experiences. They suggested that these episodes may well leave the individual with a pervasive sense of emptiness and fatalistic despair and in a condition of "ontological fear" (Greyson and Bush, 1992, pp. 104, 109)." Interestingly enough, Grof has found evidence of the same effects for persons whose psychedelic experiences remain unresolved and under the imprint of BPM II (Grof, 1975, p. 151).

Finally, let me summarize the testable hypotheses concerning this last variety of frightening experience that follow from my analysis. First, we would expect that a disproportionate number of these experiences would involve the use of anesthetics, and that possibly they would be more likely to be reported by women. Second, the long-term effects of these experiences, unless modified by later transcendental encounters, should prove to be quite different from, and more negative than, those typically associated with radiant NDEs.

Conclusion

This analysis I have offered of the three varieties of frightening NDEs that Greyson and Bush distinguished in their typology is scarcely more than a first step toward guiding future research on an important but neglected topic in near-death studies. The formulation that I have proposed, however, does at least have the advantage that it leads to a number of testable hypotheses that could be evaluated in subsequent investigations of frightening NDEs. Moreover, it also points to the possible relevance of other more encompassing perspectives, such as that drawn from *A Course in Miracles*, traditions of Eastern thought, the mythology of the hero's quest, and Grof's transpersonal model, in terms of which to understand the full range of NDEs generally.

Of course, I hold no expectations that the framework I have outlined here will be sufficient to explain *all* cases of frightening NDEs. Indeed, there have been some instances already reported in the literature

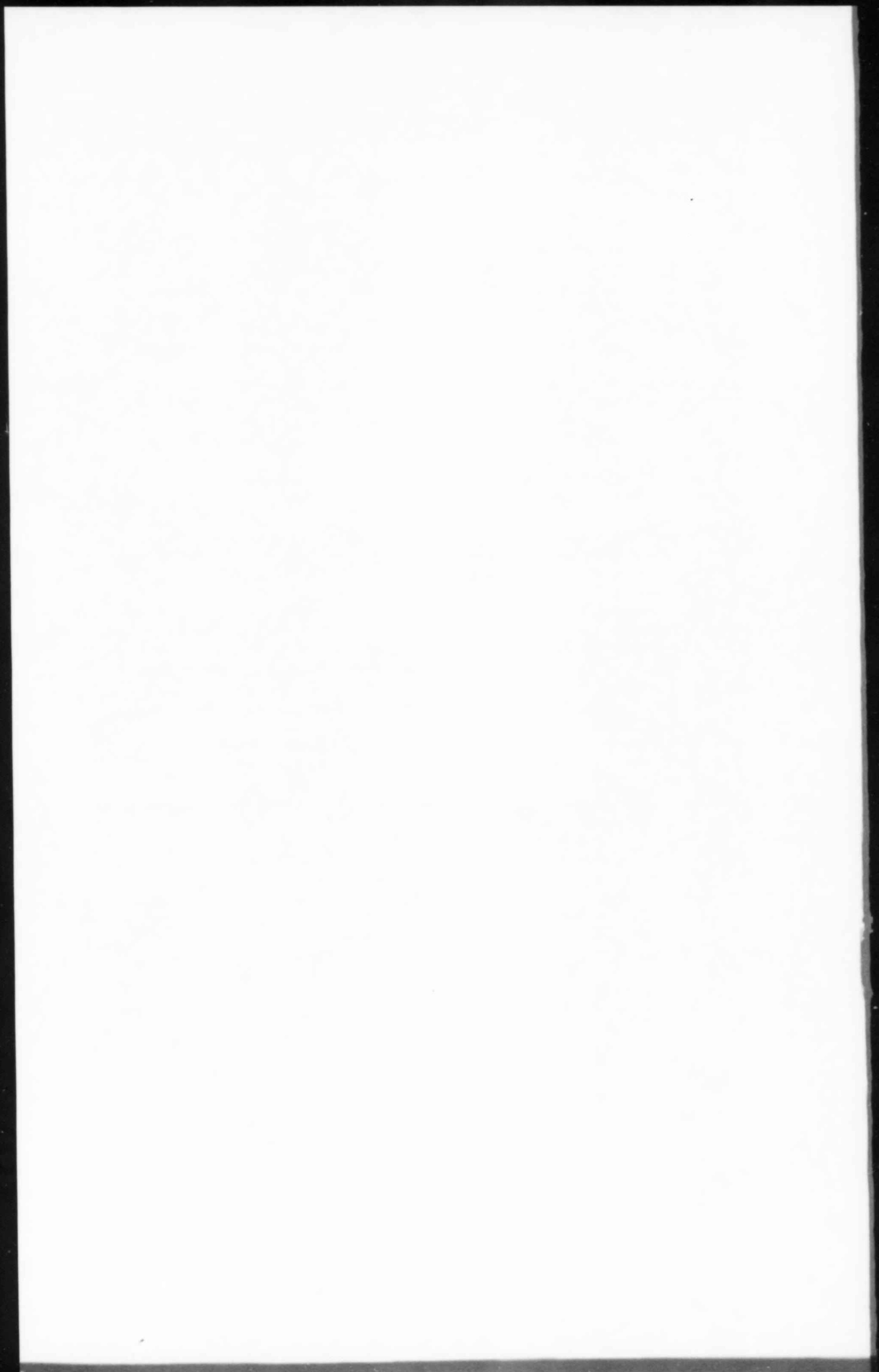
(Irwin and Bramwell, 1988) that appear not to conform to my analysis. But this is not surprising since any given NDE is certainly multi-determined and obviously not all possible factors that may influence these experiences can be addressed by any one model. The question—and it still needs to be answered by future research—is whether the ideas I have brought forward here will be useful both in stimulating further work on frightening NDEs and in helping us understand their dynamics and variations.

One last point on the ontological status of these frightening NDEs is in order. According to my analysis, the fear associated with these encounters is mediated by the human ego, which is ultimately an empty fiction. One might say, then, that frightening NDEs are themselves illusory phantasmagories thrown up by the ego in response to the threat of its own seeming imminent annihilation. These understandable and even terrifying distractions, however, will in time prove to be no match for the power of the Light, which is unconditional and, if I am right, an expression of Reality itself. Thus, it is the transcendent and not the frightening NDE that is, after all, a leaking through of ultimate reality. Frightening NDEs merely reflect the fact that hell is actually the experience of an illusory separative ego fighting a phantom battle.

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A Perinatal Interpretation of Frightening Near-Death Experiences: A Dialogue with Kenneth Ring

Christopher M. Bache, Ph.D.

Youngstown State University

ABSTRACT: While endorsing several of Kenneth Ring's conclusions, I propose a more comprehensive interpretation of frightening near-death experiences (NDEs). I criticize Ring's interpretation of meaningless void NDEs as emergence reactions and argue that all three forms of frightening NDEs—inverted, hellish, and meaningless void experiences—are better understood as rooted in the perinatal level of consciousness. I expand Ring's account of resistance to ego death as the cause of these NDEs, and develop the broader implications of a perinatal reading of frightening NDEs. Finally, I introduce and explore parallels with the "dark night of the soul" experience.

Anyone familiar with Stanislav Grof's work cannot help but be struck by the phenomenological parallels between perinatal symptomatology (Grof, 1975, 1985, 1988) and frightening near-death experiences (NDEs) (Atwater, 1992; Grey, 1985; Greyson and Bush, 1992; Irwin and Bramwell, 1988; Rawlings, 1978). These extensive parallels suggest that Grof's concept of the perinatal level of consciousness may hold an important key to understanding these enigmatic NDEs. Kenneth Ring is aware of these parallels and discussed them in his analysis of the meaningless void variety of NDE in his article, "Solving the Riddle of Frightening Near-Death Experiences" (1994). Ring's analysis is insightful and productive, yet I believe that the parallels with perinatal experience are much more extensive than he has recognized.

Christopher M. Bache, Ph.D., is Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Youngstown State University. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Bache at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Youngstown State University, Youngstown, OH 44555-3448.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to attempt a solution to the riddle of frightening NDEs by bringing Grof's paradigm to bear on the problem. Specifically, I argue that all three types of frightening NDE—inverted, hellish and meaningless void experiences—show distinctive perinatal features, not just the meaningless void type, as Ring suggested. Accordingly, I propose that all three are best understood as rooted in the perinatal level of consciousness and that the differences between them are primarily differences of degree, not kind. This argument challenges Ring's suggestion that meaningless void NDEs are not true NDEs but emergence reactions to inadequate anesthesia. Establishing the perinatal roots of frightening NDEs also allows me to deepen Ring's analysis of resistance to ego death as their cause, to suggest new directions for future research, and to reframe our thinking about these NDEs by noting some provocative parallels to the mystic's "dark night of the soul" experience.

Let me state candidly at the outset a basic conviction that informs this approach to the problem. Put succinctly, it is this: that what we catch glimpses of in NDEs, we get sustained looks at in therapy with lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD). In NDEs we get short, intense, and usually unrepeated access to intense states of consciousness that lie outside sensory consciousness. Studying large numbers of NDEs gives us a more complete picture of this terrain, but we are always limited by the fact that our data base is a collection of (for the most part) one-time-only forays beyond space/time consciousness.

In LSD therapy, on the other hand, we get extended and repeated access to a variety of states of consciousness that appear phenomenologically to overlap with and subsume the NDE states. In both contexts, studying the experiences of many persons stabilizes and extends our vision, but the greatest advantage of the therapeutic context is repetition. Repeated immersion in these nonordinary states activates and dramatizes the larger, organic processes involved. Processes that we see piecemeal in NDEs, therefore, are seen more comprehensively across a long string of therapeutically focused LSD sessions. If this assumption has merit, Grof's model should be able to help us solve the riddle of frightening NDEs: why do they occur and what do they represent?

Common Ground With Ring

Let me begin by identifying three central points of Ring's presentation with which I am in complete agreement, and which constitute common ground in our approaches. First, frightening NDEs are not as

real as radiant NDEs; they do not have the same ontological status. As Ring expressed it, "it is the transcendent and not the frightening NDE that is, after all, a leaking through of ultimate reality." In Grof's approach to therapy, the perinatal matrices eventually consume themselves, yielding permanently to the transpersonal realities they had obscured.

Second, frightening NDEs can sometimes convert to pleasant NDEs. Setting aside for the moment the final disposition of meaningless void experiences, Ring's demonstration that both inverted and hellish NDEs, when yielded to, convert themselves to pleasant NDEs is important for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that these NDEs and transcendent NDEs are two aspects of an underlying, organic process. Second, it demonstrates that they represent a truncated form of the radiant near-death experience. In them a process that is triggered by nearly dying is interrupted and sometimes arrested. These frightening NDEs can thus be thought of as *incomplete NDEs*.

Third, Ring's suggestion that frightening NDEs are caused by our resistance to ego-death opened up an exciting new line of thinking in the discussion. *A Course in Miracles* (1975) is in complete agreement with Grof's observations on this point: ultimately, we suffer because we resist the fact that the personality, which we had taken as our identity, does not exist as anything real or enduring. I suggest, however, that Ring's account of this resistance did not go deep enough, as Grof's paradigm indicates that this resistance is actually rooted in the perinatal level of consciousness.

The Parallels With Perinatal Experience

Ring convincingly argued, with Grey's support (1985), that hellish NDEs are "merely more intense versions of 'inverted' NDEs." His presentation of the case of Howard Storm, in which a hellish NDE converted to a pleasant NDE, removed the only remaining obstacle from Greyson and Bush's study (1992) to viewing inverted and hellish NDEs as differing only in severity. I will therefore focus my attention on hellish and meaningless void experiences. If it can be demonstrated that these two types of NDEs share a common origin, we will be on safe ground assuming that the same holds true for inverted cases.

Ring did an excellent job of demonstrating the close parallels between meaningless void NDEs and Grof's Basic Perinatal Matrix II (BPM II) experiences. In both contexts individuals experience existence as completely devoid of purpose and doomed to failure. All our

attempts to construct meaningful lives and to create anything beautiful are seen as utterly futile. Death and destruction are the paramount realities that despoil and mock our dreams. In both contexts persons must confront agonizing feelings of metaphysical alienation, loneliness, and desperation. Everything appears hopeless and completely without meaning.

What Ring left out of the picture, however, is the fact that the anguish of BPM II frequently culminates in profound experiences of hell. Indeed, Grof observed that the experience of hell is often the deepest level of BPM II. For example, in *Realms of the Human Unconscious* he wrote:

More frequently the activation of this matrix results in a rather characteristic spiritual experience of "no exit" or "hell." The subject feels encaged in a claustrophobic world and experiences incredible physical and psychological tortures. This experience is characterized by a striking darkness of the visual field and by ominous colors. Typically, this situation is absolutely unbearable and, at the same time, appears to be endless and hopeless . . .

The characteristic elements of this pattern can be experienced on several different levels; these levels can occur separately, simultaneously, or in an alternating fashion. *The deepest levels are related to various conceptions of hell*, to situations of unbearable physical, psychological, and metaphysical suffering that will never end, as they have been depicted by various religions. (1975, p. 116; my emphasis)

If we compare this summary of BPM II experiences with Grey's summary of negative and hellish NDE experiences, the parallels are striking:

A negative experience is usually characterised by a feeling of extreme fear or panic. Other elements can include emotional and mental anguish, extending to states of the utmost desperation. People report being lost and helpless and there is often an intense feeling of loneliness during this period coupled with a great sense of desolation. The environment is described as being dark and gloomy, or it can be barren and hostile. . . .

The hell-like experience is defined as being one which includes all the elements comprehended in the negative phase, only more so in that feelings are encountered with a far greater intensity. There is often a definite sense of being dragged down by some evil force, which is sometimes identified with the powers of darkness. At this stage, visions of wrathful or demonic creatures that threaten or taunt the individual are occasionally described, while others recount being attacked by unseen beings or figures which are often faceless or hooded. The atmosphere can either be intensely cold or unbearably hot. It is

not uncommon during this phase of the experience to hear sounds that resemble the wailing of 'souls' in torment, or alternatively to hear a fearsome noise like that of maddened wild beasts, snarling and crashing about. Occasionally, respondents will report a situation that resembles the archetypal hell in which the proverbial fire and an encounter with the devil himself are experienced. (Grey, 1985, p. 58)

To fully appreciate the degree to which hellish BPM II experiences mirror hellish NDE experiences, one must compare individual cases. This can be done by following the references listed at the beginning of this paper. To illustrate the intimate detail of the correspondences one will find there, let me insert two cases. The first account, previously unpublished, comes from an LSD therapy session of a well-educated professional and contains paradigmatic BPM II content:

I don't know how to describe the places I was in today, the searing pain and torment of thousands and thousands of beings, myself with them, tortured to their breaking point and then beyond. I did not want to believe that regions of such unspeakable horror existed. I moved through layer after layer of anguish, descending into more and more primitive levels until eventually I reached a level I can only liken to hell itself. Excruciating pain. Unspeakable horror beyond any imaginings. I was lost in a rampaging savagery that was without bounds. The world of the damned. The worst pictures of the world's religions which universally describe the tortures of this place only touch the surface. The suffering tears you apart until you've died a thousand times and can't die any more. Then you find way to die some more.

Compare this account to the following description of a hellish NDE from the Evergreen Study (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981):

I went downstairs! Downstairs was dark, people were howling, [there was] fire, they wanted a drink of water. . . .

First we went down. . . . it was pitchblack. . . .

It was not a tunnel, more than a tunnel, a great big one. I was floating down. . . .

I seen a lot of people down there, screaming, howling. . . .

I'd say about, almost a million to me. . . .

They were miserable and hateful. They were asking me for water. They didn't have any water. . . .

[H]e was there. He had his little horns on. . . .

I know him anywhere. . . .

The devil himself! (p. 114)

The phenomenological parallels between these two sets of experiences are extensive and detailed. Furthermore, their dynamic patterns

also demonstrate striking consistencies. For example, in both contexts fighting the experience simply intensifies it, while yielding to it causes it to resolve itself into a positive transpersonal experience. If allowed to run their full course, both experiences culminate in ego death followed by spiritual rebirth (Grof, 1985), as Ring noted.

In the context of LSD therapy, the experience of hell constitutes the deepest form of the crisis of meaning. What makes hell hell is not just excruciating pain but "knowing" that this pain is completely devoid of meaning. Interestingly enough, at least some NDErs appear to agree with this assessment. In two of the four cases that Greyson and Bush (1992) listed as examples of eternal void NDEs, subjects spontaneously described their experiences in terms of Hell. One even penned a poem to this effect:

I have been to Hell.
It is not as you say:
There is no fire nor brimstone,
People screaming for another day.
There is only darkness—everywhere. (p. 105)

If, therefore, BPM II combines in a coherent manner meaningless void and hellish experiences, this suggests that these two types of NDEs might not be as distinct as Ring proposed, but might in fact have common roots in the perinatal level of consciousness. Furthermore, if inverted NDEs are correctly viewed as simply milder versions of hellish NDEs, then we find in Grof's category of perinatal experience a dimension of consciousness that underlies and unites all three types of frightening NDEs. Different aspects of BPM II appear to surface in different NDEs, sometimes separately, sometimes in conjunction with other aspects. Sometimes the experience is particularly severe, sometimes milder. These are all variations seen in the context of LSD therapy.

The only remaining obstacle to this proposal is the absence of a documented case in which a meaningless void NDE converts to a radiant NDE. Such a case would strengthen the hypothesis put forward, and indeed the prolonged failure to find such a case would weaken it. As Greyson and Bush (1992) noted, the sample of void NDEs is as yet quite small, and all we can say for sure at this point is that the jury is still out on this one. On the basis of the parallels with psychedelic experience, I predict that it is only a matter of time before such a case appears, just as Ring was able to locate a case of a hellish NDE converting where Greyson and Bush had found none.

Before developing the perinatal interpretation of frightening NDEs further, let me clarify the import of the evidence presented thus far for Ring's interpretation of meaningless void NDEs as emergence reactions to inadequate anesthesia.

Meaningless Void NDEs as Emergence Reactions

Given the existence of a perinatal matrix that includes the full range of experiences that show up in both void and hellish NDEs, it would seem advisable that we not attempt to explain their appearance through entirely different mechanisms, but look instead for a unified explanation of their origin. If this seems a wise course of action, we then have two options. Either we move to reclassify hellish experiences together with meaningless void experiences as emergence reactions, or we drop this interpretation of meaningless void experiences altogether. I recommend the latter option for two reasons.

First, Grof (1975) has argued that neither the physical nor the psychological symptoms associated with psychedelics can be interpreted as resulting from the direct pharmacological stimulation of the central nervous system. The experiences that surface in the psychedelic state are too variegated from person to person and change too much across a single individual's multiple sessions to be reasonably interpreted as mere pharmacological artifacts. Furthermore, there is a demonstrable logic to the experiences that emerge over a string of sessions that indicates a successive unfolding of deeper and deeper layers of the unconscious.

When Ring suggested therefore that we might best understand meaningless void experiences as "reflecting mainly the effects of these anesthetic and psychedelic agents on human consciousness," he misrepresented the true psychoactive effects of psychedelics at least. Grof's data clearly indicate that we must interpret the states of consciousness triggered by LSD in terms of the psyche's inherent processes, not in terms of biological responses devoid of psychological significance. As for ketamine, Grof (1980) has criticized interpreting the peculiar states of consciousness that one experiences during awakening from this anesthetic as emergence reactions. Ketamine induces a state of dissociative anesthesia quite different from the state induced by conventional anesthetics. In low doses it functions as a psychedelic, inducing an out-of-body state in which the patient detaches from physical reality and shifts to other levels of consciousness. The parallel Ring drew to LSD and ketamine "induced" experiences, therefore, actually

argues *against* interpreting meaningless void NDEs as mere emergence reactions. (It is interesting to note in this context that Ring's very unpleasant experience on ketamine was cognitively consistent with the view of life offered by *A Course on Miracles* (1975). The essence of each is that our lives as we know them on Earth are not "real" compared to another reality outside time/space. What *A Course in Miracles* offers as a supreme illumination nevertheless inspired horror when experienced directly. Is the source of this horror ketamine or the ego's resistance?)

There is a second and definitive reason for not classifying these experiences as emergence reactions, and this is the fact that the full range of BPM II experiences, including meaningless void experiences, can surface in therapeutic contexts that are completely drug free. In *The Adventure of Self-Discovery*, Grof (1988) set out the principles and methods of "holotropic therapy," a very intense form of experiential psychotherapy that combines intensive breathing, evocative music, and focused bodywork. The cases presented there demonstrate that the perinatal experiences that emerge in this context are for all intents and purposes indistinguishable from those that emerge in psychedelic contexts.

One last comment: Ring was rightly struck by Greyson and Bush's (1992) observation that the majority of their meaningless void NDE cases occurred during childbirth under anesthesia. While Ring focused on the anesthesia as a possible explanation for these experiences, I would suggest that we look to childbirth itself. Grof has observed that the experience of giving birth sometimes stimulates the emergence of the perinatal level of consciousness in delivering mothers. Given the central role of biological birth in perinatal experience, it is not surprising that giving birth should sometimes cause memories of their own birth to surface in women. Other perinatal content, such as the meaningless void aspect, would then be drawn in through association to this natal aspect, following the complex logic of the perinatal matrices.

Having said all this, I do not want to suggest that anesthesia has no role whatsoever in precipitating frightening NDEs. If anesthesia plays a part here, it lies, I think, not in generating these experiences but in lowering the resistance of ego-consciousness to the unconscious, thus allowing these powerful underlying experiences to emerge. In the final analysis, neither childbirth nor inadequate anesthesia causes these unpleasant experiences in the sense of being their ultimate source, but both may contribute to their emergence in this specific context. To understand their true cause, we have to look beyond these triggers and into the deeper psyche.

Integrating Ring's and Grey's Approaches

Taking his lead from *A Course in Miracles* (1975), Ring argued that the source of frightening NDEs lies in our fear of losing our ego-identity:

If, upon having an NDE, you are strongly identified with your ego and sufficiently attached to it that you cling to it like a drowning man might clutch to a raft, you will naturally bring a great deal of fear into your experience, . . . Such an individual's emotional state will then tend to generate images consonant with that fear, which will only cause it to strengthen. The person will therefore continue to feel deeply menaced, as he or she is indeed threatened with extinction—as a separate ego.

Grey took a somewhat different approach in *Return from Death* (1985), where she suggested that hell-like NDEs might be caused by the release of negative emotions that had been trapped in the psyche. She directed our attention to the negative post-mortem *bardos* described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz, 1957) and suggested that these reflect " 'unfinished business' that has become trapped in the psyche or soul and which continues to cause problems until recognised and overcome" (p. 191).

Both of these approaches to the problem have merit and both contribute important pieces to the discussion, but neither by itself is sufficient, I think, to solve the riddle of frightening NDEs.

The problem with Ring's approach is one of proportion. Estimates of the incidence of frightening NDEs are preliminary and tentative but range from 1 to 22 percent of NDEers (Gallup and Proctor, 1982; Garfield, 1979; Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981; Ring, 1980), with the lower figure being the more commonly cited. Yet the condition of overly identifying with our egos would appear to be nearly universal. Among the millions of persons who have had NDEs, surely more than, say, 10 percent were "strongly identified" with their egos at the time of their NDE. Why, then, did only this small percentage of them experience the kind of frightening NDEs that this attachment should have generated?

At one point Ring appeared to narrow the scope of this correlation. He cited Igor Kungurtsev's (1991) observation from his research on treating alcoholism using ketamine that persons who are very control-oriented often had frightening experiences on ketamine because they had trouble giving up control of their experience. Accordingly Ring suggested that "those individuals who are unable to let go, or who enter the experience with undue apprehension for whatever reason

(great situational fear, personal rigidity, massive religious indoctrination concerning the existence of a literal hell, etc.) would be expected to undergo 'inverted' NDEs, at least to begin with." This seems like a reasonable suggestion and may very well be a factor in individual instances, particularly in weaker, inverted cases. However, I do not think the fact that some people are more afraid of losing control of their lives than others will by itself solve the problem of proportion. The discrepancy involved is still too great.

Surely it is not the exception but the norm in our culture to approach death "with undue apprehension." While personality rigidity, religious indoctrination, or situational trauma may intensify an individual's fear of death in specific cases, the fact is that our culture is pervasively and profoundly frightened by death, and people in general are terrified at the prospect of surrendering their body/mind identities. Indeed, *A Course in Miracles* (1975) states clearly that those who hold their ego identities lightly are still the exception, not the rule, among us humans. If this is the case, then the problem of proportion is very real for Ring's hypothesis. When so many people are frightened of death and ego-dissolution, why are so few of them propelled into frightening NDEs?

Grey's suggestion that in frightening NDEs people are confronting unresolved, negative aspects of their unconscious would also seem to have merit, particularly given the correspondence with *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz, 1957). By itself, however, it fails to account for the rather narrow thematic content of these experiences. That is, if individuals were simply confronting "unfinished business" from their lives, we would expect these confrontations to show a greater variety than they in fact do.

A point of clarification is needed here. Several researchers (Greyson and Bush, 1992; Rawlings, 1978) have suggested that frightening NDEs show considerable phenomenological variety compared to the more consistent content of positive NDEs, and this would appear to contradict my claim of narrow thematic content for these experiences. I do not, however, think there is a problem here. While the imagery of frightening NDEs may be somewhat variegated, the underlying themes of these experiences are relatively narrow and well defined, as all commentators have observed. These themes, outlined above, are remarkably consistent from person to person and have an almost "archetypal" quality about them. Grey mentioned this archetypal quality but failed to give any explanation for it.

Despite this problem, I think Grey's suggestion points us in the right direction, as does Ring's focus on the role of resistance to ego-death. *In the context of Grof's paradigm, both observations can be viewed as correct and complementary.* By tracing the roots of frightening NDEs

to the perinatal level of consciousness, we will be able to incorporate both of their observations into a comprehensive solution to these puzzling experiences.

A Perinatal Interpretation of Frightening NDEs

The experiential parallels cited above strongly suggest that all three forms of frightening NDEs are rooted in the perinatal level of consciousness. I now want to set out a more fully developed presentation of this proposal. Let me begin by reviewing the most pertinent features of perinatal experience, as described by Grof (1975, 1985, 1988).

Narrow and Universal Thematic Content

In contrast to the variety of themes and issues that characterize the psychodynamic level of consciousness, the content of the perinatal level is rather narrow. It focuses on those problematic experiences that are universal and endemic to the human condition. Its themes are birth, physical pain, disease, aging, and death. It collects and stores the undigested remnants of those experiences that most seriously challenge our individual physical and psychological existence.

Highly Condensed

At the perinatal level, the unconscious is organized into highly condensed systems (COEX systems) that store our experiences in thematically congruent clusters, Basic Perinatal Matrices (BPMs) I through IV. When the perinatal level is activated, one confronts not simply individual memories and fears but highly sedimented and compressed patterns of memories and fears, the distilled residue of lifelong behavior patterns. Because the energy of a COEX system is the cumulative energy of all its component parts, such encounters are exceptionally powerful and overwhelming.

The Repository of the Illusion of Separate Existence

As the intersection of the personal and transpersonal dimensions of consciousness, the perinatal level has both personal and transpersonal aspects. It is *not just the fetal level of consciousness* but rather an operational mode of consciousness in which the personal and transpersonal blend, sharing their organizational patterns and structures.

Given its hybrid nature, our description of the perinatal will differ depending on whether we are looking at it from the personal or transpersonal side of the equation.

From the personal perspective, the perinatal appears to be the basement of the personal unconscious in which are stored the undigested fragments of those experiences that have most seriously threatened our physical and psychological integrity. It is the repository of the most serious challenges to our existence. Small wonder, then, that fetal experiences would figure so large here, as they derive from that period in our development when we were most vulnerable and most easily overwhelmed by our environment.

From the transpersonal perspective, however, the perinatal domain looks quite different, and here we discover interesting common ground with *A Course in Miracles* (1975). From the transpersonal side, the perinatal domain looks like the residual core of the insanity of atomized existence. It is the repository of our individual and collective attempts to live the lie of separateness, to pretend that we exist as autonomous beings, isolated from the surrounding tapestry of existence. As such it represents the supreme philosophical ignorance and psychospiritual disease. The perinatal level consolidates the identity of an individual and an entire species that has not yet used its self-awareness to penetrate to the roots of its existence where it would discover its connection to the whole of life.

From the personal perspective, perinatal experience takes the form of being attacked and fighting back, of killing and being killed, until eventually we are completely and utterly destroyed. As we make the transition to the transpersonal perspective, however, these same experiences are discovered to be loving attempts to rescue us from our misguided efforts to cut ourselves off from the larger flow of life itself. Merciless attack from one perspective is merciful deliverance from another. We were not being killed at all but being birthed into a reality that is larger, more fundamental, and more "real" than physical reality. Ring's discussion of *Jacob's Ladder* (Rubin, Lyne, and Marshall, 1991) is directly on target here. Indeed, this movie could be viewed as a screenplay of the perinatal dimension.

Patterns in Perinatal Experience

In BPM II-IV, the individual must face the deepest roots of existential despair, metaphysical loneliness, and profound feelings of guilt and inferiority; but the nuance and focus of the confrontation differ in each phase and follow a developmental sequence.

In BPM II the subject typically experiences an overwhelming assault against which he or she is utterly helpless. Tortured without chance of escape, he or she is plunged into extreme metaphysical despair. Existence appears to be completely meaningless, and feelings of guilt, inferiority, and alienation have a distinctly hopeless quality to them. This is usually the first matrix that appears in therapeutic contexts.

In BPM III many of the above themes are continued but with an essential difference. Because there is now a slight possibility of escape—the cervix is dilated—a titanic struggle for survival takes place. A frequent experience related to this matrix is the encounter with purifying fire that destroys all that is disgusting or corrupt in the individual (Grof, 1980).

In BPM IV the subject eventually loses the struggle for survival and experiences complete ego-death. His or her entire world collapses with the complete loss of all meaningful reference points. After the subject has died as an ego, he or she experiences rebirth into a trans-individual mode of consciousness. All torment suddenly ceases and is followed by experiences of redemption, forgiveness, and profound love. These experiences are subsequently deepened in a mystical direction as the subject becomes absorbed into fully developed experiences of cosmic unity characteristic of BPM I (Grof, 1975).

The death-rebirth process is never fully actualized in a single session, and many sessions of repeatedly engaging the same issues are required before one has exhausted all perinatal content. The usual pattern is that a subject working at this level will eventually experience a major perinatal crisis centering on one of the phases described above. Yielding to and resolving the crisis will usually shift the person into positive transpersonal experiences for the remainder of the session, even though perinatal content may remain for future sessions. During the final stage of a session, persons may experience reentry difficulties as their consciousness shrinks back to its normal boundaries if they get stuck in unresolved psychodynamic or perinatal material (Grof, 1980). (This pattern parallels James Lindley, Sethyn Bryan, and Bob Conley's (1981) observation that negative experiences often occur at the beginning and the end of NDEs.) If the process is continued through multiple sessions, a final death-rebirth experience will eventually consume all perinatal material. In subsequent sessions the subject will move directly into transpersonal experiences.

Let me now apply these observations to frightening NDEs. One of the important insights in Ring's *Heading Toward Omega* was that "What occurs during an NDE has nothing inherently to do with death or with the transition into death" (1984, p. 226; Ring's emphasis). His articulation of the parallels between transcendent NDEs and the mystical

experiences that emerge in various meditative disciplines demonstrates that nearly dying is but a trigger that catapults persons with some consistency into higher states of consciousness that can also be cultivated through various consciousness-expanding techniques.

What happens, however, if for some reason the thrust toward this higher state of awareness does not carry someone all the way to the point of transcendence? What happens if the consciousness-expanding power of their NDE is sufficient to carry them beyond their personality consciousness but insufficient to open them to the transcendental level of their being?

The indications from LSD therapy are that these persons would get caught somewhere in the labyrinth of their deep unconscious. When persons experience a transcendent NDE, they have been catapulted through this labyrinth and end up beyond it. *They have not dissolved it* but have pierced it to reach the larger reality it screens. If they do not get this far, however, they will be susceptible to a perinatally tainted NDE.

We might think of such a person as stuck in the tunnel that most NDErs pass through without complication. The tunnel here represents the transition from the personal level of consciousness to the transpersonal, that is, the transition through the perinatal domain. In this context it may be significant that in three of the cases that Greyson and Bush (1992) presented, the frightening phase of the NDE began while the subject was actually in the tunnel or in the transition phase.

A perinatal interpretation of frightening NDEs both confirms and expands Grey's (1985) suggestion that in these NDEs one is confronting problematic unfinished business from one's life. Grof's paradigm expands our framework for conceptualizing this encounter by identifying a level of consciousness deeper than the personal unconscious, where the dynamics of this "unfinished business" go beyond anything envisioned by conventional psychodynamic theory. At the perinatal level of consciousness, our idiosyncratic histories begin to yield to a narrow set of issues fundamental to human existence: birth, physical pain, disease, and death. The experiences that distinguish us as individuals begin to yield to experiences that unite us with other members of our species. This turn toward the collective is more than simply a turn to collective *themes*, however; it is also a turn to a collective *mode of experience*.

According to Grof's model, the perinatal dimension of consciousness is both the basement of personal consciousness and the beginning of transpersonal consciousness. It is the region of overlap between the individual and that which the individual is part of: most immediately,

the species mind (Bache, in press; Sheldrake, 1981, 1989). When we turn deeply within, we find that our personal experience of perinatal themes begins to merge with our species' experience of these same themes. At the perinatal level, our mind opens to the species mind, and we are drawn into collective experiences of previously unimaginable proportions. Here the line between my pain and the pain of my species is systematically blurred until it disappears. As Grof observed:

A subject can experience himself as thousands of soldiers who have died on the battlefields of the whole world from the beginning of time, as the tortured victims of the Spanish Inquisition, as prisoners of concentration camps, as patients dying of terminal diseases, as aging individuals who are decrepit and senile, as mothers and children dying during delivery, or as inmates maltreated in chronic wards of insane asylums. (1975, p. 116)

When these sorts of experiences emerge in either therapeutic or near-death contexts, they will take the form of collective ordeals centered on perinatal themes. As already noted, one of the most painful experiences associated with BPM II is the experience of hell. This hell will be not the private projection of an individual's personal pain but a genuinely collective experience. We might think of it as the creation of the species as a whole, to which the individual has gained access through his or her NDE. In the psycho-plastic world one enters after dissociating from one's body, personal and collective components will be synthesized into experiences of devastating intensity. The archetypal quality of such experiences derives from the fact that one is confronting patterns of suffering that are universal to the human condition. (Parallels with the *Sidpa Bardo* described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* [Evans-Wentz, 1957] are striking.)

Though intense beyond description, these hellish experiences are, as Ring argued, not as ontologically real as the transcendent experiences that will eventually emerge if one completely surrenders to this suffering. Whether experienced in the context of LSD therapy or an NDE, the transition from hell takes the form of (partial or complete) ego-death. What is dying is not anything real but merely an attachment to a partial identity. In its place arises a new identity, grounded not in our bodies but in a transcendent reality that underpins all existence.

Grof's paradigm, therefore, supports Ring's assertion that frightening NDEs are driven by our resistance to ego death. It also, however, deepens it by emphasizing that this resistance is more than situational or characterological. It is in addition a resistance that is embedded in the deepest strata of the personal and the collective unconscious. It is

our *cumulative* resistance to the most fundamental spiritual truth about ourselves. This resistance may surface in a milder form in inverted NDEs or in a more severe form in hellish and meaningless void NDEs. Its roots, however, reach into the very depths of our existential confusion about ourselves.

It would seem that a perinatal interpretation of frightening NDEs has only worsened the problem of proportion that I earlier criticized in Ring, and I think this is partly true. If our resistance to ego-death is rooted in the perinatal level of consciousness, and if this level is a universal structure of consciousness, it would appear to be even harder to explain why so few persons who nearly die experience frightening NDEs.

A perinatal reading of frightening NDEs does not so much solve this problem as redefine it and thereby shift where we should be looking for answers. It suggests that the reasons some people have frightening NDEs while others do not lie less in the psychodynamic particulars of the individuals involved and more in the variables inherent in their NDEs. While I think that Ring was correct that some individuals hold on to their ego-identities more fiercely than others, I suspect that the larger share of the explanation for perinatally tainted NDEs will lie in the conditions that cause some NDEs to be weaker than others.

Why do frightening NDEs occur so infrequently? I don't know. Perhaps it happens more often than we have yet identified, as some researchers think (Clark, cited in Flynn, 1986). Perhaps more people have frightening NDEs and either do not remember them or do not report them. Alternatively, it may be the case that once a strong NDE is initiated by a biological trauma, deviations from the prototypical script are simply rare. Perhaps once certain thresholds are crossed, the psychospiritual impetus generated by nearly dying is simply strong enough to carry the large majority of persons through the perinatal and into the transpersonal dimension of consciousness without complications arising. There is much we do not understand here and much work to be done. At the present time, however, the most important point to realize is that the experiences of those few whose journey to the light is interrupted or sidetracked closely parallel experiences that occur in therapeutic contexts that are better understood and better mapped. By recognizing the perinatal features of frightening NDEs, we can incorporate them into a comprehensive model of consciousness that makes sense of them and, in this way, lessens their sting.

The interpretation of frightening NDEs offered here is, of course, a speculative hypothesis requiring further verification and refinement. One avenue of research immediately suggests itself. Grof (1980) has

outlined a set of clinical complications that can arise when perinatal material emerges in therapy but is unresolved by the end of the session. Research into the aftereffects of frightening NDEs that do not convert to radiant NDEs might explore the degree to which these aftereffects parallel the clinical derivatives of unresolved BPM II material in LSD therapy. This is a complex assessment that must take into account the pre-existing condition of the LSD patient, but these are manageable variables if handled carefully. Correspondingly, holotropic therapy might be explored as a therapeutic option for survivors of frightening NDEs. Positive results would strengthen the hypothesis put forward here.

With further research it may be necessary to consider a modification of the perinatal thesis presented here. It may turn out to be the case that inverted NDEs will be able to be satisfactorily conceptualized in terms of the psychodynamic level of consciousness, and the perinatal level may need to be invoked only for hellish and meaningless void NDEs. I am convinced of the necessity for a perinatal interpretation for the latter two types of NDEs, but am less certain about the status of inverted NDEs. This division may end up being the preferred balancing of the arguments Ring and I have put forward. A detailed phenomenological study is needed to clarify this question. We are trying to mark divisions in the spectrum of consciousness, and inverted NDEs are clearly in a gray zone. Whatever the final determination of this matter, it will not affect the overall thrust of the argument presented here, as the perinatal is the foundation of the personal unconsciousness and the repository of our deepest illusions about our true identity and our deepest fears of ego-death.

The Frightening NDE as a Purification Experience

There is an important point that I want to make in the closing pages of this paper, and I wish to address it particularly to those who have had a frightening NDE and to those who might one day counsel someone who has had one.

Survivors of frightening NDEs are doubly alienated in our culture. First they must manage the general failure of our society even today to accept the reality of their experience. Second, and more importantly, while the majority of NDEers report basking in divine light, they were taken to hell, or at least to its doorstep. How could they not take this as a devastating commentary on their life? How could they not conclude that they were deliberately singled out for harsher treatment by some

higher intelligence? This reaction is reinforced by theological interpretations of frightening NDEs (Rawlings, 1978). If the analysis proposed here is essentially correct, however, these are all fundamentally mistaken interpretations of what has occurred.

A frightening NDE is not an alternative NDE but an incomplete NDE. It is not necessarily a reflection of the individual's moral character but represents instead an encounter with some of the deepest structures of the psyche, structures that are universally distributed among persons. Why one person is carried through these structures while another is not has more to do with the strength and intensity of the NDE itself than with the person undergoing the experience, and these are influenced by many factors, most of which probably have yet to be identified.

Perhaps one of the clearest ways to make this point is to remind ourselves that the descent into hell has happened to some rather saintly persons. It happened, for example, to St. Teresa of Avila, the famous sixteenth-century Catholic mystic. Teresa regularly entered into nonordinary states of consciousness while deep in prayer and not infrequently left her body during these episodes. While in the out-of-body state, she had extraordinary experiences, many of which were quite unpleasant. In her autobiography (1991/1565), which was written not for publication but to allow her superiors to assess her spiritual experiences, she described in detail one particularly difficult ordeal, a descent into hell:

The entrance, I thought, resembled a very long, narrow passage, like a furnace, very low, dark and closely confined; the ground seemed to be full of water which looked like filthy, evil-smelling mud, and in it were many wicked-looking reptiles. At the end there was a hollow place scooped out of a wall, like a cupboard, and it was here that I found myself in close confinement. But the sight of all this was pleasant by comparison with what I felt there. . . . My feelings, I think, could not possibly be exaggerated, nor can anyone understand them. I felt a fire within my soul the nature of which I am utterly incapable of describing.

My bodily sufferings were so intolerable that, though in my life I have endured the severest sufferings of this kind . . . none of them is of the smallest account by comparison with what I felt then, to say nothing of the knowledge that they would be endless and never ceasing. And even these are nothing by comparison with the agony of my soul, an oppression, a suffocation and an affliction so deeply felt, and accompanied by such hopeless and distressing misery, that I cannot too forcibly describe it. To say that it is as if the soul were continually being torn from the body is very little, for that would mean that one's life was being taken by another; whereas in this case

it is the soul itself that is tearing itself to pieces. The fact is that I cannot find words to describe that interior fire and that despair which is greater than the most grievous tortures and pains. I could not see who was the cause of them, but I felt, I think, as if I were being both burned and dismembered; and I repeat that the interior fire and despair are the worst things of all.

In that pestilential spot, where I was quite powerless to hope for comfort, it was impossible to sit or lie, for there was no room to do so. I had been put in this place which looked like a hole in the wall, and those very walls so terrible to the sight, bore down upon me and completely stifled me. There was no light and everything was in the blackest darkness. (pp. 301-302)

NDErs who have had similar experiences might be interested to know that Teresa considered this and her many other frightening experiences in the out-of-body state to be especially beneficial and helpful to her spiritual development! She did so not because she harbored masochistic tendencies but because she had come to understand that these ordeals were a kind of purification process. Through them something negative was being lifted from her soul. By submitting to them and following them wherever they took her, she found that her experiences of mystical union deepened.

Teresa was not alone in experiencing such ordeals, nor in recognizing their purifying function. In fact, the descent into hell is simply an extreme instance of a large set of arduous experiences that are a rather common feature of the mystic's journey. In the Christian tradition, these difficult experiences are called the "dark night of the soul," and Teresa's close friend, St. John of the Cross, is perhaps their most well-known chronicler (1959/1584). The *Vissudhimagga*, a Buddhist manual of meditation practice, calls them the "Higher Realizations." Collectively these experiences represent a series of particularly harsh purifications aspirants must undergo as they slowly uncover the transcendent core of their being.

In a series of papers, I have argued extensively that these dark night experiences are also manifestations of the perinatal dimension of consciousness (1981, 1985, 1991). In the dark night, spiritual practitioners are encountering essentially the same set of experiences that surface during the perinatal phase of LSD therapy or holotropic therapy. The experiences are the same, the patterns within these experiences are the same, and the outcome of successful engagement is the same—ego-death and spiritual rebirth into a transcendental order of existence. If NDErs occasionally experience their own version of the dark night, they can take some comfort in knowing that they are keeping rather

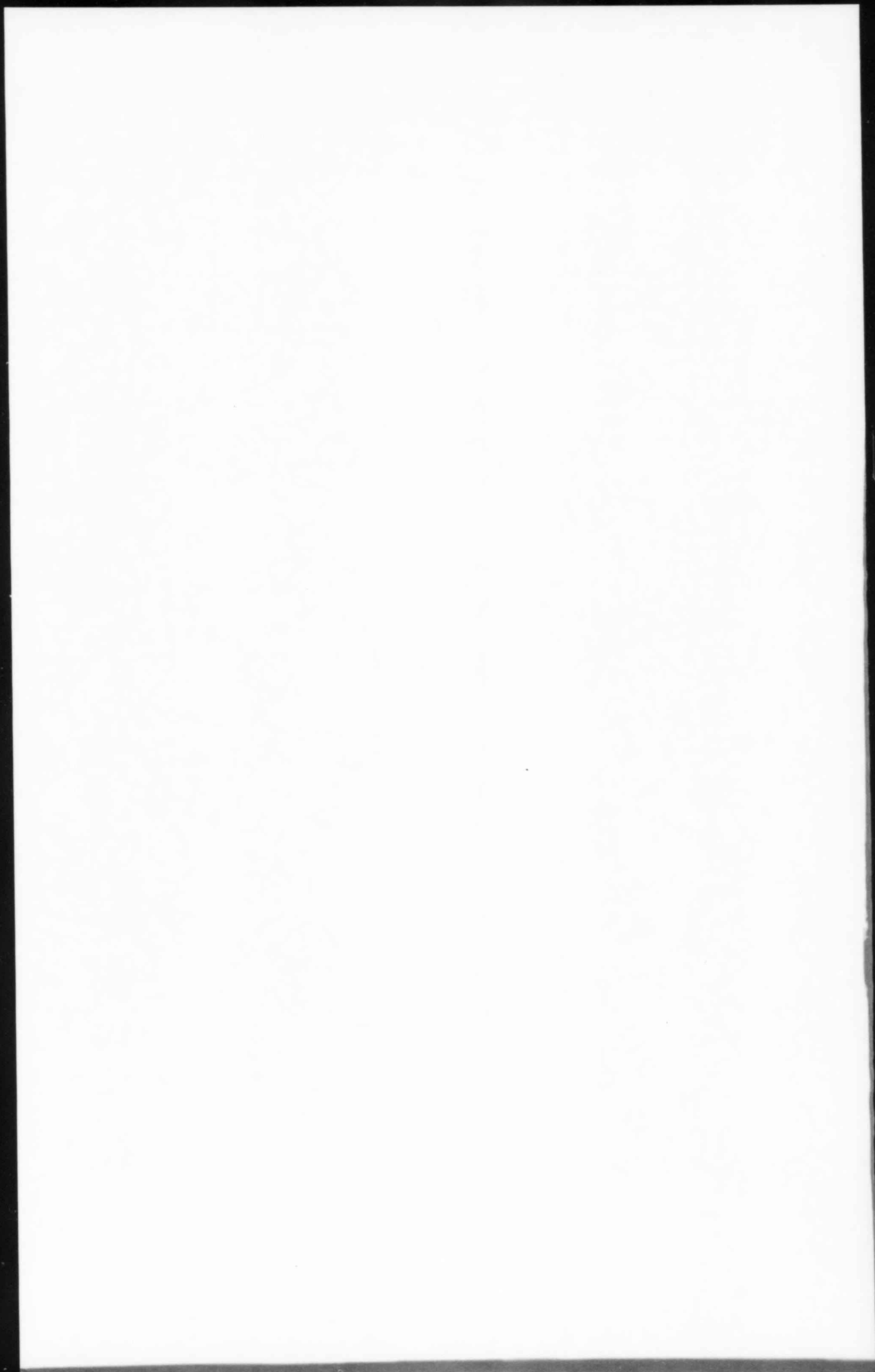
distinguished company. Furthermore, they should understand that in confronting these extremely dark recesses of the unconscious, they are not being punished or judged but rather purified and made ready for their final homecoming.

A larger pattern emerges. The descent into hell and similar excruciating experiences occur on the mystic's journey to God, the LSD subject's journey to Wholeness, and the NDEr's journey to the Light—a striking confirmation of Ring's earlier contention that we must separate the NDE from the context of death in order to understand it fully. Not only in its ecstatic forms but also in its problematic forms, the NDE shows itself to be a coherent part of humanity's spiritual pilgrimage to discover its true nature.

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The Paradox of Jonah: Response to "Solving the Riddle of Frightening Near-Death Experiences"

Nancy Evans Bush, M.A.
Bolton, CT

ABSTRACT: Kenneth Ring has suggested that frightening near-death experiences (NDEs) can be explained as reactions to inadequate anesthesia or as phantasmagories thrown up by a resistant ego. By contrast, I contend that these same arguments have been used by skeptics to question the validity of the radiant NDE; that as they have been found inadequate there, so they do not adequately address the meaning or value of the terrifying experience; and that experiences of the depths may be equally productive and as worthy of serious study as are experiences of radiance.

During the still-brief life of the field of near-death studies, a major educational task has been to counter the arguments of reductionism. Confronted by accounts of experiences that do not fit the prevailing model of medical thought and scientific materialism, skeptics have claimed that near-death experiences (NDEs) are merely meaningless byproducts of physiological and/or psychological processes. The argument is, "It's only . . ."—the effects of anoxia, drugs, medications, temporal lobe dysfunction, depersonalization, hallucination, birth recollection, or a number of other explanations. In any of these skeptical interpretations, the *precipitant*, not the experience itself, becomes the focus of interest; the mechanics of the process may be of interest, but the NDE itself is rationalized as nonexistent, its meaning and value in the life of the experiencer dismissed as irrelevant.

Nancy Evans Bush, M.A., is a writer, editor, and pastoral counselor in private practice, and is President of the International Association for Near-Death Studies. Reprint requests should be addressed to Ms. Bush at P.O. Box 9486, Bolton, CT 06043.

In "Solving the Riddle of Frightening Near-Death Experiences," Kenneth Ring (1994), unquestionably the dean of near-death studies, confronted experiences that do not fit the prevailing model of near-death thought. It is a curious irony that his response falls squarely into the reductionist mode, albeit reductionism of a somewhat different order. As he has for so long argued that it is their presuppositions that have kept the skeptics from recognizing radiant NDEs as something more than empty physiological and psychological responses, so I suggest that a different set of presuppositions, based on the prevailing myth of the glorious NDE, can blind one to recognizing in the phenomenology of terror an invitation equally valid: the better known, and understandably more popular, NDE marks an encounter with the heights of spiritual experience; the other, with its depths.

The Pharmacological Explanation Revisited

Noting that anesthesia may sometimes produce frightening effects, and that the void experiences appear identical to one aspect of the perinatal experiential model identified by Stanislav Grof (1975) in his work with psychedelics, Ring concluded that terrifying experiences of the void "are not true NDEs as such but are essentially emergence reactions to inadequate anesthesia . . . further intensified by initial resistance and fear."

The pharmacological explanation of NDEs was first discussed in 1975, with the publication of Raymond Moody's *Life After Life*. Its inconclusiveness was noted by Ring himself in his first book in this field, *Life at Death* (1980), and later by Michael Sabom (1982); this and other reductionistic theories have been thoroughly examined by Carol Zaleski (1987), who also observed weakness in the argument. If the pharmacological theory is inadequate as explanation of radiant NDEs, it is difficult to understand how it should now be considered sufficient as explanation of one type of frightening experience.

Further, considering Ring's study of mysticism and the Mystery Schools (1985, 1988), "Solving the Riddle of Frightening Near-Death Experiences" displayed a curious innocence of the existence of the void as a significant element in deep spiritual experiences across many traditions. One also wonders at his failure to mention that Grof's perinatal matrix contains *all* NDE experience categories—radiant and hellish as well as the void. The model includes experiences of cosmic engulfment, "no exit," death and rebirth, cosmic unity and transcendence, and transpersonal characteristics; the imagery sweeps through

tunnels, eschatological visions of dreadful monsters and titanic struggles, the slaying of demons, emergence into radiance, visions of paradise, and revelations of universal knowledge; there may be out-of-body experiences, encounters with spirits of the deceased, life review, and ineffable bliss (Grof, 1980). In fact, Grof has noted that among transpersonal experiences, "The ultimate experience appears to be that of the mysterious primordial emptiness and nothingness that contains all of existence in a germinal form, the void" (1980, p. 31)—and encountered by an unready self, this would likely be experienced as terrifying. Surely there is more to be said about these experiences of the void than they are "not true NDEs as such" but merely an anesthesia emergence reaction.

Metaphor and Illusion

Ring has provided the helpful tag of "inverted" for the first type of terrifying NDE observed by Bruce Greyson and me (1992) in our sample of 50 cases, in which "hellish" and "void" appear as the other two types. The inverted and hellish experiences remain marginally within Ring's definition of possible near-death experience, but only because they may transform to the classic radiant pattern.

Given a selected premise from Eastern tradition (that ego and the physical world are illusion), Ring argued that terrifying NDEs "merely reflect the fact that hell is actually the experience of an illusory separative ego fighting a phantom battle." Using as secondary premise the underlying assumption of *A Course in Miracles* (1975) ("what's real—and the only thing that's real—is what NDErs call 'the Light'"), he came to the only possible logical conclusion, that "frightening NDEs therefore . . . aren't real." So, in their terrifying aspects, these experiences were dismissed as "illusory phantasmagories." Only the radiant NDE could be considered "a leaking through of ultimate reality."

It hardly bears saying that to an individual struggling with the profound aftereffects of a frightening NDE, as to his or her therapist or pastor, it may be of limited value to learn of the life-shaping event that nothing happened.

One problem here is that of mixed levels of discourse: a tumbling of metaphysics and testable hypotheses, spiritual and psychological language, "that world" and "this world" realities. At the level of theory and spiritual metaphor, Ring's discussion of course rings true. Yet ego is illusory in the same manner in which a tree is illusory: however well one knows that at the subatomic level a tree is mostly space with

widely scattered, busy blips of activity, only Buckaroo Banzai (Rauch, 1984) can manage the feat of maneuvering through subatomic space. At the level of daily life, that same tree, too rapidly encountered, will maim or kill.

At this level, ego provides the organizing center around which we build our conscious lives and from which we are enabled to develop a functioning self. Without ego, any of us will demonstrate all the psychodynamic stability of Jell-o. Without ego, as Greyson commented recently, "there's schizophrenia" (B. Greyson, personal communication, May 1993). The life of ordinary consciousness is lived at a level from which neither tree nor ego can be safely dealt with as merely, and exclusively, illusion. From the practical standpoint, Ring's dismissal of the frightening NDE as phantasmagory echoed remarkably like Ronald Siegel's (1980) insistence that all NDEs are merely hallucinations, not to be taken seriously.

Further, the degree of ego-centrality in a given individual at any given time may be determined as much by developmental process as by "personal rigidity [or] massive religious indoctrination concerning the existence of a literal hell." The ego-centrism of a younger person may be quite appropriate in terms of psychological stage of development and life tasks. To equate being unprepared to surrender the sense of hard-won self, as Ring quoted Bruce Joel Rubin (1990, p. 191), with having "spent a lifetime angrily fighting with the world" is in this sense unjust, as is the corollary, "Death is an experience of ego loss. . . . If, however, you have loved life, if you have learned to remain open to it, then death is a liberation" (Rubin, 1990, pp. 190-191). Subtle but implicit in Rubin's words is a modern-day version of the ancient idea that "good" people (not sinners now, but those able to "let go of ego") will be rewarded and "bad" people (those perceived as overcontrolling or rigid) will be punished. It is a secular variant of the concepts of literal heaven, hell, and judgment for sin, no less spiritually injurious to all parties for having cast out theological language.

Without the tinge of judgmentalism inherent in that approach, Grof himself has noted:

[These] mythologies and concepts of God, heaven and hell do not refer to physical entities, events in time or geographical locations, but to psychic realities experienced during altered states of consciousness. These realities [note plural-N.E.B.] are an intrinsic part of the human personality that cannot be repressed and denied without serious damage to the quality of human life. For the full expression of human nature, they must be recognized, acknowledged and explored, and in

this exploration, the traditional depictions of the afterlife can be our guides. (1980, p. 31)

The "full expression of human nature," then, cannot be limited to the likable and wanted. "Life," wrote W. Brugh Joy, "seeks to be fully expressed" (1990, p. 232). He also wrote, "Life Itself teaches dramatically and powerfully through events centered around crisis, loss, and death. When such events are not embraced—when the dark, the demonic, and the destructive are not integrated—the conscious mind partitions itself from total consciousness and creates a reality reflecting only that which is acceptable to one's conscious awareness" (1990, p. 331). If the riddle of frightening experiences is to be found authentically, it must be in the *fullness* of nature, human and otherwise, and in the totality of consciousness and of the universe itself.

The Riddle of Frightening Experiences

No one—absolutely no one—*wants* to know about the experiences of cosmic terror. It is no surprise that frightening near-death experiences have remained for so long unspoken, or that even the best of minds will attempt to argue them away. The horrific experience brings us face to face with the deepest of all human wounds, what Søren Kierkegaard termed "dread," the knowledge of our mortality, and the radical knowledge that being contains both nova and black hole, light and darkness, radiant bliss and intolerable horror, Christ and Lucifer. The titanic power of the core spiritual experience, whether radiant or terrifying, is that it plunges so radically and deeply into the nature of being, respecting neither readiness nor desire.

Of writers about near-death experiences, it was Zaleski (1987) who first and most cogently examined the contemporary tendency to admit only the congenial, the "garden of unearthly delights," for exploration. Yet nothing in centuries of human spiritual experience supports the conclusion that enlightenment, salvation, or self-actualization are one-dimensional exercises in a reality involving only rapturous encounters with a beneficent oneness. Beyond the wistful assumptions of much contemporary talk about spirituality lies a difficult truth: that dualism cannot be reconciled by attending to only one of its aspects. Paradox is an uncomfortable life partner.

The same St. Paul who wrote, "I am convinced that there is nothing . . . that can separate us from the love of God" (Romans 8:39) could also write, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!"

(Hebrews 10:31). Like Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, we prefer to see the "good" side of Krishna, God—the beautiful, the Being of Light, the unconditionally loving, bliss-bringing, the Creator and giver of life and joy. Like Arjuna, we recoil in terror from the dark, horrific aspects of self/Self, Godhood, and the universe. It is easier to plead to the sentimental Jesus of our longing than to the battered and despairing Jesus hanging bloodily on crossed posts. We would embrace II Isaiah more than Jeremiah, the sweet-faced Virgin Mary rather than the monstrous, bloody, and death-dealing Kali. Yet, to use Christian metaphor, Good Friday precedes Easter, and both are contained within the Resurrection. As Joseph Campbell has written, the god unrecognized appears as a demon (Campbell and Moyers, 1988). We will strive for the death of our ego rather than face our demons and our darkness.

The riddle of frightening near-death experiences cannot be solved either by evasion or by dismissal; it cannot be "solved" at all, but only glimpsed and lived. May Sarton has written (1974):

Kali, be with us.
Violence, destruction, receive our homage.
Help us to bring darkness into the light . . .
Crude power that forges a balance
Between hate and love.

The key seems to lie with reconciliation, with that incongruous balance of Sarton's poem. This is so difficult to fathom! Naomi Ruth Lowinsky, writing of the Kali aspect of the feminine (a quality in men as well as women), observed that "the red, fiery, passionate, bloody aspects of our nature, and the black, death-dealing, underworld aspects of women have been demonized" (1992, p. 188). Yet universally, what remains hidden and repressed becomes the beast that will devour us, individually and collectively; kept down, shadow, like pressurized magma in Mt. St. Helen's, has a nasty way of squirting sideways, destroying everything in its path.

Jonah, too, tried to "escape from the Lord." No doubt he, too, floundered in terror to avoid sinking into the depths, into the maw of the great fish. "The whale," wrote Campbell, "represents the power of life locked in the unconscious" (Campbell and Moyers, 1988, p. 146). Of stories in which the protagonist, the experiencer, is sucked into the abyss, he commented:

The conscious personality here has come in touch with a charge of unconscious energy which it is unable to handle and must now suffer all the trials and revelations of a terrifying night-sea journey, while

learning how to come to terms with this power of the dark and emerge, at last, to a new way of life. (p. 146)

The task is not to deny the experience its share of reality, but "to come to terms with this power of the dark." The result, no less than with radiant encounters, can be transformation.

Michael Grosso, referring to radiant experiences, has observed that "For many, the NDE serves as a tool of deconstruction," leading to "a liberating disillusionment" (1991, p. 57). This is no doubt the point Ring was after, but Grosso's argument is less narrow and therefore more persuasive, and applies as well to frightening experiences:

I am trying to make explicit the mythic intentionality that seems at work in the NDE. I am not trying to explain it in the sense of reduce it to an *a priori* set of ideas or ontological presuppositions. I am rather, in a spirit of active imagination, trying to carry the myth forward, see where it wants to go, immerse myself in its *élan vital*, its meandering evolutionary impetus.

So let us enter into the flow of the near-death imagery. Instead of trying to figure out whether it is an illusion or a defense mechanism or a phantasm conjured by some brain mechanism, let us enter into the mythic near-death journey and see where it leads us. (pp. 57-58)

I couldn't have said it better. One need not—and had perhaps better not—dismiss the experience of the abyss or the void or the seemingly demonic as illusion with no ontological substance. And at the level at which the horrific experience is brought into daily living—that is, at the this-world, incarnational, stage-developmental level of physical and psychological being—exploration of symbol, metaphor, and meaning will certainly be more productive as a starting point than dismissal on abstract theoretical grounds.

It is past time to accord to frightening NDEs the same level of consideration that has been granted to radiant experiences. In this regard, Ring's hypotheses are welcome. They can, should, and no doubt will be tested; one hopes the testers will approach their task recognizing that what the hypotheses will yield is demographic and descriptive data about precipitating factors, not information about the experience or its incorporation into the fullness of human life and meaning.

No one knows the number of individuals whose lives are being shaped in the awesome, awakened consciousness of a "realer than real," terrifying encounter. They—and all of us—deserve to hear more than "It's only"

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Frightening Near-Death Experiences Revisited: A Commentary on Responses to My Paper by Christopher Bache and Nancy Evans Bush

Kenneth Ring, Ph.D.
University of Connecticut

ABSTRACT: In this commentary, I discuss the responses to my paper on frightening near-death experiences (NDEs) written by Christopher Bache and Nancy Evans Bush, and I try to show that there are many points of agreement among us all. While Bache and I saw the ontological status of frightening NDEs differently than did Bush, all of us agreed on the psychological reality and importance of these experiences. Research on frightening NDEs, long overdue, is encouraged and reasons for its urgency are briefly mentioned.

Despite the apparent—and sometimes real—differences in perspectives on frightening near-death experiences (NDEs) between Christopher Bache and Nancy Evans Bush, respectively, and me, I welcome and appreciate their creative and indeed eloquent papers (Bache, 1994; Bush, 1994) on this subject in response to mine (Ring, 1994). Indeed, my hope that my own ideas about frightening NDEs would spark further thinking about these troubling and sometimes traumatic encounters has already been realized by the efforts of these authors, and I feel certain we have only seen the beginning of a new wave of interest in this variety of NDE. In time, we can also expect further research on frightening NDEs, too, which is clearly needed if we are to have the

Kenneth Ring, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Connecticut. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Ring at the Department of Psychology, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269-1020.

empirical data required to settle definitively some of the outstanding questions on which, for the moment at least, these writers and I can only offer divergent opinions.

In fact, many of the differences between us turn out, on closer analysis, not to be differences at all or to be based on misunderstandings, easily resolved, of some of my remarks. The result is that, as a whole, there is a considerable amount of unsuspected common ground among all three of us, as I will attempt to show. Some differences, and differing emphases, remain of course, and I will not attempt to gloss over these; but let me start my commentary by pointing to the commonalities, beginning with Bache's paper on the perinatal approach to frightening NDEs.

The Perinatal Analysis of Frightening NDEs

In my view, Bache has done a masterful job in showing how Stanislov Grof's perinatal model can in principle elegantly and parsimoniously subsume many of the phenomenological features of frightening NDEs. In this respect, I accept and admire Bache's formulation as an improved and conceptually more appealing revision of some of the ideas I had presented in my own paper. As a result of his work, we can now discern a clear progression in our attempts to integrate the findings on frightening NDEs, starting from the pioneering article by Bruce Greyson and Bush (1992). Those authors, of course, began by distinguishing three distinct *types* of frightening NDEs. In my paper, I suggested that we consider inverted and hellish NDEs as variants of one another, but regarded the meaningless void type of experience as something of a different category altogether. Bache, by directing our attention to Grof's model, has found a way to conceptualize them all as variants of a single domain of experience, that stemming from perinatal matrices.

The case for the applicability of Grof's model to NDEs was not original with Bache, of course (Grof himself, together with Joan Halifax, made a compelling argument along these lines as long ago as 1977 in *The Human Encounter With Death*), but Bache deserves the credit for showing how it can be used to achieve an integrated understanding of the varieties of frightening NDEs in particular. This approach, as he made clear, was not only consistent with the general interpretive line I had suggested, following *A Course in Miracles* (1975), but took us deeper into the psychodynamics of frightening NDEs than I was prepared to go. With Bache as our Grofian guide, it

was easy to see that I had certainly failed to make the point that meaningless void NDEs may well shade into hellish experiences as they progress and that, therefore, it may not be justified to distinguish them in quite the way I had suggested.

Nevertheless, I still think there is something to be said on behalf of the interpretation I gave to experiences of the meaningless void type, at least in terms of their precipitating conditions. That brings us directly to the thorny issue of the nature of so-called "emergence reactions," which is of course a medical term, and to the question of whether, in the interests of parsimony, one really needs to invoke them in the first place. In fact, I suspect that Bache and I understand these reactions in a similar way. For my part, I certainly accept the idea that emergence reactions may very well reflect some kind of ego-resistance to surrendering to "ultimate reality" (if I may put it that way), and that the anesthetic simply triggers that response but does not "cause" it.

But I still think it is an *empirical question* whether such experiences are disproportionately associated with the use of anesthetics as I suggested (and as Bache allowed) and specifically for women in childbirth. Bache may have been right that women giving birth may well be more likely to tune in to the perinatal zone of consciousness, but there would still be a way to provide a test of our separate hypotheses. If I was correct, meaningless void experiences ought to be more commonly found in conjunction with the use of anesthetics generally and especially in childbirth; if Bache was right, they ought to be equally likely for women having natural childbirth as well as those who undergo labor with the help of anesthetics. Theoretically, however, our interpretations of the *psychological basis* for emergence reactions were virtually identical, it seems to me.

Thus, while emergence reactions *in themselves* may not be a separate type of frightening NDE, *anesthetics* may play a distinctive role in abetting NDEs of the meaningless void variety. Only research into the matter can answer this question, but, at least in principle, it should be easy to gather the necessary data.

An especially valuable feature of Bache's paper for me was his pointing to an apparent and hitherto overlooked (at least by me) conundrum pertaining to frightening NDEs. Specifically, if my analysis based on ego-attachment was correct, one would expect to find many *more* persons reporting frightening NDEs than we do. (Indeed, Bache's perinatal approach implied the same thing.) And he rightly raised the obvious question here: why *aren't* there more? I am inclined to agree with one of his implied suggestions, namely, there may be something about the NDE that makes it even *more* powerful than lysergic acid

diethylamide (LSD) in that it seems to accelerate persons *through* the kind of psychodynamic and perinatal realms that psychedelic therapy plunges them into.

A crude metaphor here would be that LSD is like a freight train chugging through the unconscious whereas the NDE is a rocket ship that tends to streak through these zones at an incredible speed (as NDErs, in fact, often suggest when they characterize their movement toward the light as involving "the speed of light" or even a supraluminal velocity). This, however, is obviously only a metaphor and not a testable proposition, yet it at least has a certain plausibility, especially when one considers that an LSD trip typically lasts many hours, whereas an NDE may take place in a few minutes or less. At any rate, Bache has again put his finger on a problem that both researchers and theoreticians on frightening NDEs will need to address more searchingly.

Finally, there is one point of convergence between us that not only needs to be mentioned but deserves to be stressed: the ontological status of frightening NDEs. Bache was very clear on this point, and more than once remarked that frightening NDEs, for all their psychological compellingness, do not have the same ontological significance as the classic radiant NDE whose center is the light. From this latter perspective, frightening NDEs are, in effect, merely the shadows of the ego and ultimately just as insubstantial as the ego itself. Frightening NDEs are, in short, phantoms, even though they may scare and torment us more than any earthly terror could ever do.

It is just this explosive mix of devastating impact and undeniable psychological reality that informed Bush's critique of my paper and made her argue against Bache and me that frightening NDEs are comparable ontologically to those of the transcendental variety. In her desire to give ontological parity to frightening NDEs, however, she seriously distorted the implications of my reading of these experiences and failed to see that in practice, if not in theory, we hold very similar views about the significance of frightening NDEs. To find this common ground, we need to see first how she has misconstrued both my intent and my meaning.

Beating Around the Bush

In effect, Bush's unhappiness with my analysis of frightening NDEs, and especially those of an existential void variety, rested on four charges she laid against me. Let's consider them at the outset.

First, she claimed that I was playing a reductionist game in apparently asserting that such experiences, at least those of the meaningless void type, could be fully explained as nothing but emergence reactions to anesthesia. Second, she protested that I was stripping frightening NDEs of their rightful and equal ontological status, turning them thereby into some kind of *ersatz* NDE.

Third, by consigning frightening NDEs to the ontological hinterlands, I seemed to be denying their psychological reality. And finally, by denying their psychological reality, I seemed also to be dismissing them altogether and suggesting that they are mere hallucinations that have nothing to teach the individual who undergoes them or the researcher who would study them.

All of these charges, except the second, are baseless and stemmed, as I have already indicated, from a fundamental misinterpretation on Bush's part of the thrust and implications of my argument. Therefore in this response, I need to address myself to the above four points in order to show that her own fears about my conception of frightening NDEs were largely unwarranted and that, on the contrary, we share a similar sense of the importance of these experiences and the lessons we may all be enabled to learn from studying them.

To begin with, then, was I guilty of suddenly turning into the Susan Blackmore (1993) of frightening NDEs by suggesting that there are psychological and even physiological precursors to these experiences? I hardly think so. Everyone recognizes, for example, that most ordinary dreams are heralded by a distinct set of physiological conditions associated with the onset of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, yet few of us would argue that the dreams themselves are explained *away* by these factors. In like fashion, by my offering as testable hypotheses that certain psychological states, such as fear of ego loss or psychological stress reactions to anesthesia, might afford circumstances that conduce to frightening NDEs, I was only pointing to possible *triggers* for these experiences, not to complete explanations for them.

After all, as I have indicated both in my original article and again in this commentary, one of my interests is to try to promote research into frightening NDEs by drawing attention to certain testable propositions that could confirm or undermine my conception of these NDEs. And even if the empirical evidence here should provide some support for my formulation in this connection, that would not in any way invalidate these experiences but only help us to understand the conditions that tend to give rise to them in the first place.

As to the ontological issue, this is the one point where there is a true divide between Bush, on the one hand, and Bache and me on the other.

Empirics will not help us here; this has more to do with personal axiomatic presuppositions relevant to the NDE itself. All I can do here is to restate my thesis as clearly as I can, try to make a case for it, and let the reader decide for himself or herself.

In the world of ordinary duality, seen through the eyes of the ego, of course there is good and evil, heaven and hell, and so forth. That's true by definition. And we take our ego with us into the first stages of the NDE where we retain our sense of separateness. No matter that the ego is ultimately an illusion that gives rise to this false sense of separateness; it is the lens through which we have become accustomed to see the world and we don't know any other way. The ego is also a defensive system and is very much concerned with perpetuating its own survival. It desperately doesn't want to die, and when it feels threatened—unless it is absolutely and suddenly overwhelmed—it will throw up whatever roadblocks it can to resist its demise.

It is the Light that is its ultimate enemy, because on entering it the ego begins to become transparent to itself. Its game is up when the true Light of our Being—which is All Being and Everything, our primordial and eternal essence—begins to shine. The last refuge of the ego before it surrenders is formed by the wall of fear it mounts to keep out the Light. As Bob Helm, a Canadian NDEr whose full experience I previously recounted in this Journal (Ring, 1991), recently remarked to me (B. Helm, personal communication, April 9, 1993):

If we could but let go of our fears, we could indeed experience the Light *right now!* . . . To get back to where we are meant to be spiritually, we must be willing to look deeply into ourselves, find the fear and let it go, and in inner discovery let go our attachments to the darkness of Earth. For if we experience thoughts of fear, no matter how little, we to some degree block the Light, and it is of this Light *that we ourselves are created.*

Jayne Smith, another NDEr, once remarked that we are on a journey back to God (Smith, 1987), and many NDErs have commented that when they enter the Light, they realize that they are finally *home*, that they recognize it, that in a sense they have always been there but had just forgotten it. Joe Geraci, for example, once reflected that when he entered the Light he found that "It was eternity. It's like I was always there and I will always be there, and that my existence on earth was just a brief instant" (Ring, 1984, p. 54). And Beverly Brodsky, another NDEr whose account appeared in the same article as Bob Helm's, concluded her narrative by emphasizing its absolute reality and its undeniable qualities:

Nothing that intense and life-changing could possibly have been a dream or hallucination. To the contrary, I consider the rest of my life to be a passing fantasy, a brief dream, that will end when I again awaken in the permanent presence of that giver of life and bliss.

For those who grieve or fear, I assure you of this: there is no death, nor does love ever end. And remember also that we are aspects of the one perfect whole, and as such are part of God, and of each other. Someday you who are reading this and I will be together in light, love, and unending bliss. (Ring, 1991, p. 17)

These are the kind of testimonies—and they are abundant in the literature of NDEs, of course—that have led me to posit the Light as a manifestation of ultimate reality, next to which the terrified cries of the ego and its frightening images have no more substance than scenes from a horror film into whose absorbing illusions we have fallen. The NDE wakes us up from this nightmarish existence by revealing to us that our true nature is what in yoga is called Sat-Chit-Ananda: existence, knowledge, bliss. As Shankara, the great exponent of Vedanta, observed more than a millenium ago (as paraphrased in the introduction to his most famous work, *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*):

When the illumined soul passes into transcendental consciousness, he realizes the Self as pure bliss and pure intelligence, the "One without a second." In this state of consciousness, all perception of multiplicity ceases, there is no longer any sense of "mine" and "thine," the world as we ordinarily know it has vanished. Then the Self shines forth as the One. (Prabhavananda and Isherwood, 1970, p. 14)

The "One without a second" is precisely what the NDEr is enabled to experience when penetrating into the heart of all creation—the Light. When NDErs such as Diane Morrissey say things like "this was a love that didn't know hate" (Barnett, 1983), or when Patrick Gallagher avers, in speaking of the realm of Light, "I knew immediately that there was no night there" (Barnett, 1983), they are echoing the same insight. They have found themselves on a nondual ontological bedrock that is as self-evident to them as reading this print is to you.

Yes, the journey back to God may take us through the torments of hell—no one denies that—but when we arrive at our goal, if these NDErs are right, we see truly for the first time in the way Shankara (and many others) have described for us, and what *seemed* so real at the time dissolves into the illusion it was all along, as does our sense of separate identity.

But of course in ordinary daily life, as Bush made clear, we live in our ego-based world, which seems anything *but* an illusion. And it is just here, in the all-too-familiar round of our quotidian existence, that I

find myself virtually at one again with Bush's valuation of the frightening NDE and its seminal importance.

To be brief, denying frightening NDEs ultimate ontological status does not in any way call into question their psychological reality, nor does it imply I am according these NDEs some kind of secondary status in the pantheon of experiences we in this field of near-death studies choose to devote ourselves to. Bush was simply wrong to suggest that I would tell such an experiencer that "nothing happened." After my own metaphysically terrifying ketamine experience (Ring, 1994), no one could have convinced me that "nothing happened"! Of course, these experiences are important, and they must never, ever, be cavalierly dismissed as some kind of mere psychological anomaly of no consequence.

Similarly, we already know or can surmise that they have a deep impact on the lives of persons who undergo them. Consider, as an exemplification of this, the case of Howard Storm, described in my original paper (1994). Here is a man who by his own admission underwent his own hero's journey, encountering demonic entities of the most terrifying sort who came close to annihilating him, and who passed through these ordeals and emerged totally transformed by his experience so that he could be truly said to have been born anew.

Such transformations—and the lessons we all can learn from studying such cases—stemming from frightening NDEs are just as significant as those that derive from beatific encounters with the light and equally deserve our respectful attention. Indeed, precisely because they have been ignored in the field of near-death studies, research on them is long overdue. As Bush would, I'm sure, be the first to concede, however, we really have no careful work at all on how these experiences affect the individuals who undergo them, or even whether the familiar pattern of aftereffects for NDEs holds for them.

Certainly there is no question—and here I am completely in accord with Bush—that confronting the darker side of our natures and experience is absolutely essential in the process of psychospiritual growth, and that frightening NDEs are as of now a largely untapped resource whose neglect we can no longer condone. After all, as Bache has helpfully reminded us, if even the great souls of our own Western spiritual tradition have had to do battle with their demons in their journeys toward wholeness, who could ever argue that these fierce battles are not an indispensable requirement for anyone who would seek the Light? Even NDEs who come to bask in it may have to endure the agony of the life review and experience for themselves the pain they have deliberately or inadvertently inflicted on another. Life's trials, both here and hereafter, have much to teach us, and frightening NDEs beckon to all who would learn from them.

Conclusion

I hope I have been able to show in this commentary that the differences among Bache, Bush, and me are not nearly so divisive as their papers may have suggested and that, in truth, we do indeed share much common ground in our views and in the importance we place on frightening NDEs. In this connection, I need to say again that I find Bache's theoretical formulation, based on Grof's perinatal model, to be an improvement over mine, and that I was already fully in agreement with Bush's stance with respect to the need to study such experiences and their aftermath more carefully.

It should be obvious, I trust, that my original paper (1994) was an effort to encourage precisely such research, both by pointing to certain empirical questions that could be investigated, and by trying to show the relevance of a variety of larger perspectives, such as Grof's and that stemming from *A Course in Miracles* (1975), in terms of which to understand the nature and significance of frightening NDEs. In this respect, the amplifications provided by Bache and Bush in their papers were extremely helpful and together I hope the ideas of all of us who have been involved in this exchange of views will be fruitful to other researchers and scholars who will come to explore this type of NDE.

And to bring one other and perhaps more exigent note to this discussion, I would like to conclude by saying that not only is such research long overdue, but now more than ever it may be necessary for those of us with a stake in the integrity of the field of near-death studies to conduct it. Along with some of my colleagues, I have been disturbed of late by a seemingly growing tendency of the religious right to appropriate the findings of near-death research—especially regarding frightening NDEs—to serve its own dogmatic ends. This it certainly has a right to do, along with everyone else, but the uses to which our paltry database of such cases has been put by persons of fundamentalist leanings seem to be both exploitive and misleading. Perhaps this is still another reason, then, for researchers and scholars in the field to provide solid information about frightening NDEs shorn of the fervor of special pleading and religious proselytizing.

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BOOK REVIEW

Bruce Greyson, M.D.
University of Connecticut

Spiritual Awakenings: A Guidebook for Experiencers and Those Who Care About Them, by Barbara Harris. Baltimore, MD: Stage 3 Books, 1993. 118pp. + ix, \$8.00 pb. (To be reprinted by Health Communications, Dearfield Beach, FL, in 1995.)

Spiritual Awakenings breaks new ground both for Barbara Harris and for the field of near-death studies. Writing from her heart, from her own experiences, and from her years of working with other NDErs, Harris challenges us to stretch beyond the limits of who we think we are and to bring what she calls our Higher Nature into our daily lives. She encourages us to think of ourselves not as human beings occasionally having spiritual experiences, but as spiritual beings currently having human experiences.

Harris's first book, *Full Circle* (Harris and Bascom, 1990), was written after she had escaped a static marriage that could not accommodate her near-death experience. Living essentially on her own at the time, she portrayed in *Full Circle* the full range of near-death after-effects, not only the joy but the trauma as well. Now, having established herself as an individual and formed a more resilient and receptive relationship, she is able to complete the story by addressing the recovery process.

This book may not convince skeptics that emotional problems after a mystical experience often have a spiritual component, but convincing skeptics is not Harris's goal. *Spiritual Awakenings* is written for those

Bruce Greyson, M.D., is Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Greyson at the Department of Psychiatry, University of Connecticut Health Center, Farmington, CT 06030-2103.

who have experienced these difficulties firsthand—or secondhand, through loved ones—and its purpose is to help the experiencer work through them. She describes the dilemma of “life as a practical mystic” as learning how to apply on the physical plane the Grace experienced in the NDE:

The challenge is to keep our feet planted firmly, to live in both worlds, and bring the attributes of spirit here—to be an instrument of God. And at the same time functioning here, taking care of ourselves and paying our bills. To achieve this balance we can live by our own inner laws rather than outer pressures—to operate in this world but not be of it. (p. 99)

When Harris was seeking a publisher for this book, one agent told her the book was not marketable because it was not logical. Harris responded by inserting the provocative announcement in boldface on page viii of her introduction: **Warning: This Book is not Logical.** This book was written as a guide for people who are experiencing for the first time the mystical side of their nature, and that, Harris writes, is not a logical subject.

The organization of this book into three roughly equal parts, however, is quite logical. The opening section, “First Connection,” describes the process of spiritual awakening. Harris writes that there are four ways to grow psychospiritually: through regular spiritual practice; through living unconditional love; through pain and suffering; and through spiritual awakenings, such as NDEs.

Harris starts the journey by recounting her own spiritual awakening through an NDE. Though versions of this story have appeared in books before, first in Kenneth Ring’s *Heading Toward Omega* (1984), then in Charles Flynn’s *After the Beyond* (1986), and finally in Harris’s earlier *Full Circle* (Harris and Bascom, 1990), its focus improves with each retelling. Though I have heard Harris share her NDE with more audiences over the years than I can count, the version in *Spiritual Awakenings* bears witness to her continued growth over the years.

In a brief but critical section on ego inflation, Harris describes the temptation to identify with the infinite power NDErs and others encounter, and to feel superior to unenlightened friends and family. She correctly prescribes as the antidote to this ego inflation (and as the reward for having transcended it) humility, a cardinal sign of true spirituality in both Eastern and Western traditions. She uses the term “spiritual bypass” for the premature sense of enlightenment without going through the necessary inner work.

Harris describes in some detail the importance of working with the energy liberated by a spiritual awakening. While she uses the term "kundalini," she acknowledges the debate among scholars as to whether these energetic phenomena are truly manifestations of that hypothesized intelligent force, or simply a reflection of disturbances in the life energy, or "prana." Ultimately, as a body-based therapist, she declares that the name is unimportant; what matters is being able to use the energy to heal.

The middle third of *Spiritual Awakenings*, "Connecting Again," addresses directly the experiencer's struggle to readjust to mundane existence. Harris characterizes the "old paradigm" of mental health, in which spiritual awakenings are regarded as psychotic breaks, as one in which details of the healing process are hidden from the patient by the therapist. The new paradigm, which she sees starting to take hold in medicine, demystifies healing and includes the spiritual realm as coequal to the physical and mental. I agree wholeheartedly with that, as do an increasing number of physicians and psychologists. This is not repudiating the old paradigm, but rather transcending it, acknowledging that its goals are limited. As Harris accurately puts it, the goal of the old paradigm is to help us become "normal," while the goal of the new paradigm is to help us move beyond "normality" and become "whole."

Much of this middle third of the book draws on the models and language of the "adult-child movement," or the "recovery movement," particularly as it has been developed by Charles Whitfield (1987, 1991a, 1991b). While Harris's growth since her first book is evident from the first page of *Spiritual Awakenings*, it is most obvious in this section.

Much of the wisdom brought back from the NDE is experiential and cannot be put into words. Many NDErs try to verbalize their experiences nevertheless, warning as they do so that their verbal descriptions are not accurate—or they try to communicate their insights through music or art or service. Harris has found the language of the recovery movement to be right for her—and I suspect many readers will also; spiritual seekers are often drawn to the recovery movement because addiction is often rooted in spiritual longing.

Harris writes that she found her way "home" mapped out in the adult-child movement. She writes that her "soul" or "core"—the part Ring identified as participating in the "core NDE"—IS the "child within" of the adult-child movement. One reason Harris has embraced the inner-child metaphor is the connection, drawn by Ring (1984), between abuse and dissociation and then between dissociation and

access to nonordinary realities. There is a fair amount of clinical evidence to support both hypotheses: that repeated trauma teaches a child how to dissociate, and that the ability to dissociate from ordinary reality fosters awareness of other dimensions.

Some readers may take issue with the notion that a history of trauma and dissociation is the only path to alternate realities—or even the most common. Lest we get hung up on models, however, Harris reminds us that the map is not the territory—and she proceeds to demonstrate that inner-child metaphors can be used to convey considerable wisdom. As the fictional Swami Beyondananda wrote, “if you feel blocked, ask your inner child for help. Your inner child loves to play with blocks!” (Bhaerman, 1989, p. 68). Whether or not one is enthusiastic about the “map back home” that Harris found in the adult-child movement, the territory it charts is a critical and often ignored region, and it allows her to describe the difficulties faced by spiritual beings trying to survive in a material world, and to prescribe guidelines for survival.

A concrete example of the pitfalls awaiting the awakened individual is what Harris calls “romantic projection.” During heart openings, we can find ourselves bonding spiritually to others whom we may label as “soul mates” or “soul twins.” Since a heart opening enables us to experience bonding as never before, we may feel truly one with our “soul twins.” Literally enchanted by this bond that includes spiritual, emotional, and mental components, we may be tempted to actualize the sense of unity physically in a romantic relationship.

This can often lead to disaster, not only for the enchanted individual’s significant others, but for the spiritual bond to the “soul twin” as well, as the romantic involvement reintroduces into the relationship the ego-based emotions—jealousy, guilt, fear, shame, hurt, etc.—that are part and parcel of physical romance. The answer to this dilemma, Harris writes, is recognition that the unconditional love of a heart opening, so unfamiliar to most of us, does not need (in fact, cannot be restricted to) a particular love object; we are essentially falling in love with the universe and with our own “core” (after a heart opening, it can be difficult to distinguish the two).

I found Harris’s section on boundaries to be one of the most helpful, as it quite clearly discusses an issue both critical and sensitive to many NDErs. P.M.H. Atwater (1984) has highlighted how difficult it may be for NDErs to respect boundaries after an experience with the infinite; now Harris has offered some suggestions as to how to cope with that difficulty. She points out that telepathic rapport, often described by NDErs, flourishes when we experience no boundaries. However, this sense of boundlessness leaves us vulnerable to abuse, no matter how

"psychic" we may be. Abused children, she notes, never learn to form healthy boundaries, and without boundaries we tend to absorb others' pain. Drawing on her own experiences, Harris illustrates the importance of developing healthy boundaries for healthy relationships; even after we realize that we are all connected, we still need to differentiate our conflicts from other people's.

The final third of the book, "Living the Connection," nicely brings together the spiritual and the mundane, and the problems inherent in trying to live in both worlds. Harris notes here that committing oneself to loving service can feel "selfish" to the NDEr—which is actually the recognition on a deep emotional level that we're all in this together. "We recognize in everything we do," she writes (p. 99), "that the physical and psychological are only half the picture"; and in this recognition is the proof (but, alas, only for the experiencer) of a spiritual realm.

Realization that the physical realm was not the whole story led a century ago to exploration of the psychological realm. While we couldn't "see" psychological processes through our physical senses, we could see the effects on the body of a subtler realm, and from those effects inferred the existence of the psyche. Now, as Harris tells us, we face a comparable situation: we know the physical and the psychological are not all there is, because some of us are made aware of the effects on the psyche of a still subtler plane—and from those effects we can infer the existence of spirit.

In this section Harris turns the concept of dissociation as pathological on its head and shows how "spiritual philanthropists"—experiencers seeking to share with others the heart connection they enjoyed with the Infinite—can use it not to escape from reality but to enhance it. The wounded child learns to focus outside of this reality and become absorbed in an alternate one. The experiencer transforms this dissociative trait into an ability to become absorbed in this reality while staying connected to the source of unconditional love. Practical mystics, she writes (p. 102), "don't just look up to God. We look within and around!"

In her discussion of spiritual sexuality, Harris notes that once she dared to bring up in public talks transcendent sexual experiences as a path to spiritual awakening, she found audiences freely shared their own accounts. The essential spiritual nature of these experiences makes irrelevant the inhibitions and embarrassment often associated with intimacy. In describing spirituality and sexuality as two sides of the same coin, she broaches a heretical idea: that we can directly experience spirit through our bodies.

Both Eastern philosophies and Western mystical disciplines have tended to view the physical world as either a distraction or a necessary

intermediate step that must be transcended on the path to spirituality. Harris sees our physical incarnation not as a distraction or barrier, but as a legitimate vehicle for spiritual evolution. She is by no means condoning sexual addiction here; but rather advocating using the body (since we're there anyway) as an arena for our struggle with ego. Being genuinely present and intimate with another forces us to let go of self-centeredness. By trusting enough to lose ourselves to our partner, we transcend ego.

Harris wasn't being entirely truthful when she warned that this book is not logical. It does indeed have a logic, but just doesn't always feel constrained by it. It strives rather for wholeness; it has tables for the left brain and poetry for the right, and for those who want more, an appendix of helpful organizations and a bibliography.

Spiritual Awakenings is an easy book to read, and for that reason it is also an easy book to underestimate. But it would be a mistake to dismiss this book as lightweight simply because Harris writes in plain English and popular metaphors. Once again, the map is not the territory. This is a much-needed book, one that finally offers some guidelines for the painful side of NDEs. The near-death "movement" has tended to idealize NDEers, putting them on a pedestal at the risk of ego inflation. We tend to ignore their unique burdens and vulnerabilities. The recovery movement has a large library of books that focus on the dark side, on our wounds and how to overcome them. Now, in *Spiritual Awakenings*, the near-death movement has one, too.

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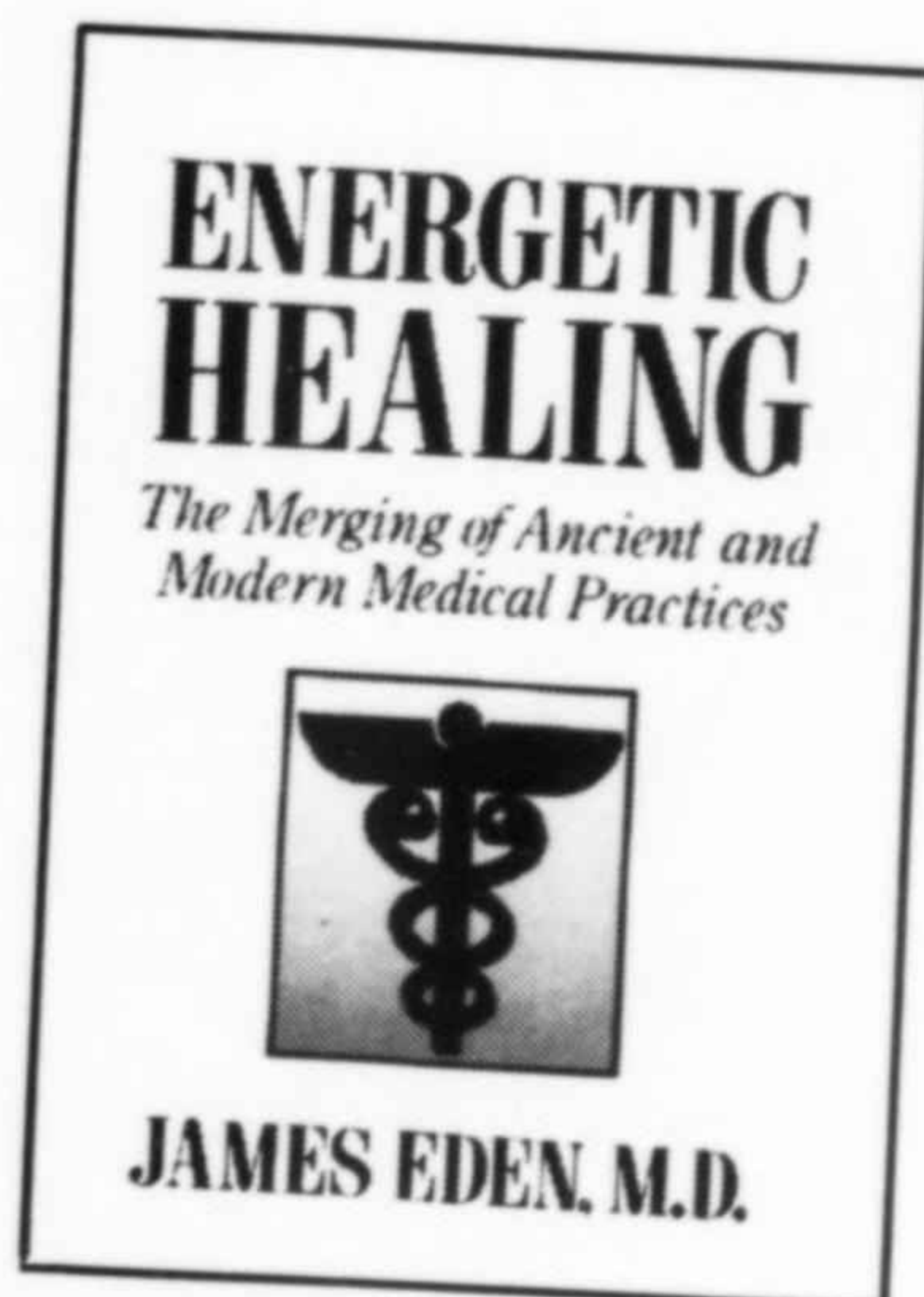
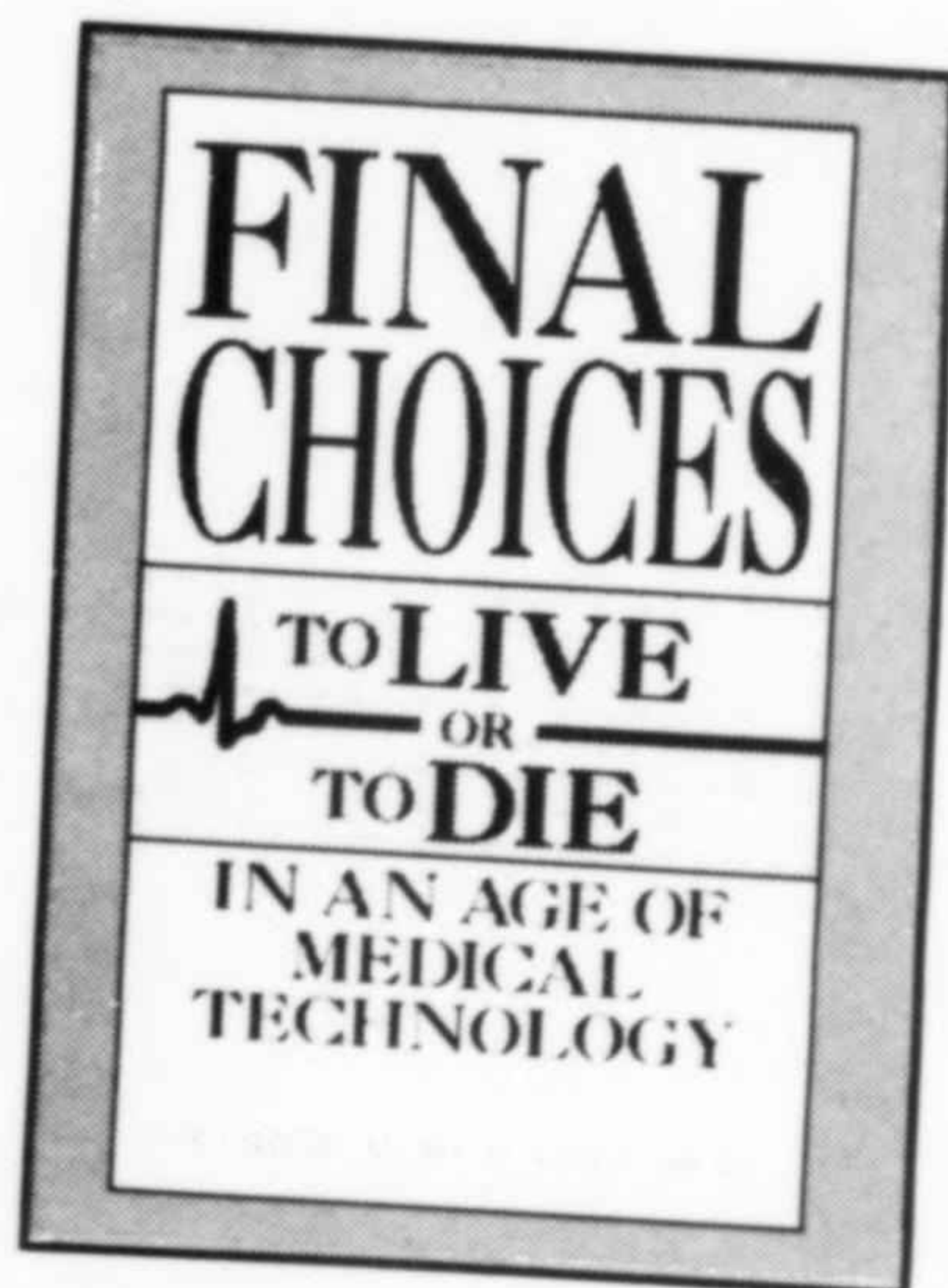
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