

Journal
of
Near-Death Studies

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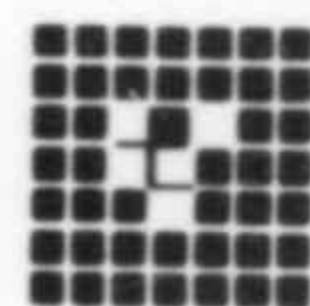
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The **INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR NEAR-DEATH STUDIES** (IANDS) is a world-wide organization of scientists, scholars, near-death experiencers, and the general public, dedicated to the exploration of near-death experiences (NDEs) and their implications. Incorporated as a nonprofit educational and research organization in 1981, IANDS' objectives are to encourage and support research into NDEs and related phenomena; to disseminate knowledge concerning NDEs and their implications; to further the utilization of near-death research by health care and counseling professionals; to form local chapters of near-death experiencers and interested others; to sponsor symposia and conferences on NDEs and related phenomena; and to maintain a library and archives of near-death-related material. Friends of IANDS chapters are affiliated support groups in many cities for NDErs and their families and for health care and counseling professionals to network locally. Information about membership in IANDS can be obtained by writing to IANDS, P. O. Box 502, East Windsor Hill, CT 06028.

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Editor's Foreword

The Fall 1994 issue of the Journal, devoted to an examination of frightening near-death experiences (NDEs), provoked vigorous responses both from our readers and in other publications. The study of these terrifying or otherwise distressing experiences appears to be where the study of blissful NDEs was 20 years ago: the experience is finally recognized as a legitimate phenomenon, but data are sparse and speculation about their meaning arouses heated controversy. We devote this entire issue of the Journal to a cross-section of varying perspectives on the frightening NDE.

In our lead article, religious scholar Gracia Fay Ellwood presents several interpretive frameworks for understanding painful NDEs. She proposes a modified typology of these experiences, and draws on the writings of classical mystics and philosophers and of contemporary NDErs to develop an integrated model of the frightening NDE as a photographic negative: an image with the values reversed that is a necessary step in creating the final "positive" photo.

Next philosopher and religious scholar Christopher Bache deepens his analysis of frightening NDEs, initially presented in our Fall 1994 issue. Expanding on Stanislav Grof's model of perinatal psychology and Rupert Sheldrake's theory of causative formation, Bache proposes a transpersonal interpretation of the frightening NDE as an experience with therapeutic implications for our species.

Near-death researcher Arvin Gibson then presents cases of frightening NDEs from his own studies, and argues that these experiences are comparable to heavenly NDEs in their validity and aftereffects. We end this issue with a Letter to the Editor from David Wiener and Susan Youngdale in which they share insights regarding frightening NDEs from Anthony Borgia's book communicated by a purportedly deceased author.

While questions remain as to the meaning of the frightening NDE and its relationship to the prototypical blissful experience, it is apparent that these painful experiences raise issues left untouched by the pleasant NDE. We look forward to more research and substantive data that may address some of these speculations.

Bruce Greyson, M.D.



Distressing Near-Death Experiences as Photographic Negatives

Gracia Fay Ellwood, M.A.

California State University, Long Beach

ABSTRACT: This essay presents various interpretative frameworks for painful near-death experiences (NDEs). It describes Bruce Greyson and Nancy Evans Bush's three-part typology of inverted NDEs, everlasting void experiences, and hellish experiences, suggesting a further breakdown of the latter into entity-centered and fire-centered. A potential fourth category is the empathetic life review. As a religious context for distressing experiences, I present Rudolf Otto's concept of the nonrational *mysterium tremendum*. The major rational paradigms that have been applied to such experiences can be categorized as the supernaturalistic, the reductionistic, and the one-world types. I give examples of several kinds of one-world views, particularly three Christian mystics of early modern times, and offer suggestions of ways in which elements of different one-world views might be combined.

The [D]love descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror. . . .
Who then devised the torment? Love.
. . . We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," 1952, pp. 143-144

O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant. . . .
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation. . . .
In my end is my beginning.

T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," 1952, p. 126

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For most of the 21 years since Raymond Moody's *Life After Life* (1975) opened the field of near-death studies on both popular and academic levels, the focus has been on radiant experiences. However, as early as 1978, Maurice Rawlings' *Beyond Death's Door* spoke emphatically of the existence of distressing experiences as well; Charles Garfield reported in 1979 that half of his dying cancer patients had distressing experiences. Besides the work of these early researchers, occasional isolated cases were published.

At that, *Beyond Death's Door* (Rawlings, 1978) was not the first book to deal with distressing near-death experiences (NDEs). *Glimpses of the Beyond*, by Jean-Baptiste Delacour, which appeared in the United States in 1974, a translation of *Aus dem Jenseits Zurück* (1973), recounted a variety of purportedly real NDEs that included hellfire and desolation scenes. The author clearly was familiar with near-death data, but his book showed signs of plagiarism and fictionalization, which left the reader unwilling to trust to the accuracy of the cases.

Garfield has not published any of his stories at all, so far as I know, making them eminently easy to disregard. Rawlings, on the other hand, recounted several stories of burning impact. But for some years, comparatively little notice was taken in mainline near-death studies. The basic reasons are not far to seek: the cases are disagreeable, and they appeared as part of a fundamentalist package that refused critical analysis. Besides, as Bruce Greyson (1990) and Nancy Evans Bush (1993) have pointed out, those who have had frightening NDEs tend to be as reluctant to tell them as investigators have been to ask. But as the 1980s progressed, the existence of distressing cases was acknowledged in several significant works, and alternative interpretations considered.

Types of Distressing NDEs

Especially important among recent studies is Greyson and Bush's essay "Distressing Near-Death Experiences" published in *Psychiatry* in 1992. Greyson and Bush presented a typology of three major kinds of distressing NDEs.

Inverted NDEs

The first type has essentially the same format as the tunnel-and-light blissful NDE, but is perceived by the experiencer as frightening

instead. Kenneth Ring referred to these with the apt term "inverted NDEs" (Ring, 1994). This kind is sometimes related to rigidity of ego boundaries with fear of loss of control, as evidenced by the change to a peaceful experience in some cases when the NDEr lets go and accepts the experience. Though much more can be said about this type, in what follows I will focus on the second and third types, which at first view pose greater difficulties, before suggesting a potential fourth type.

Everlasting Void Experiences

In the second kind, the experiencer finds her- or himself in a featureless dark void in utter loneliness. In some cases the message is given that all of life is a product of one's imagination, a cruel joke the experiencer was allowed to believe to be real. In any case, all contact with the world is seen to be permanently cut off, and the psychological pain is unutterable.

An example is the mystical experience of NDEr Peggy Holladay. She came close to death in an auto accident in 1974, and though she did not remember a narrative NDE, NDE-type images emerged into her consciousness afterwards. Thirteen years later, and four months after a major mystical encounter with the light, she was looking into a mirror one morning and asking herself, "What am I really upset about?"

Suddenly she found herself on the other side of the mirror, being dragged by some incredibly powerful magnetic force into a kind of gray outer space. She was hit (her term) by a conviction that she had died and was "completely ALONE, never to be with any loved ones, . . . no living thing again in any form." The distress was so extreme that it was as though she was feeling all the pain and fear of every living creature that had ever existed. She screamed "No, no!" and tried desperately to get back into her body, which she could still see standing on the other side of the mirror. She finally succeeded in doing so, though for several hours she felt in danger of floating up into space again (P. Holladay, personal communication). Some persons who have void experiences do in fact communicate with entities of some sort, but the sense of emptiness and aloneness may still be there (Greyson and Bush, 1992).

Holladay did not accept the fundamentalist interpretation, which she saw as harmful. Since she had already encountered the light,

which for her was and is unmistakably ultimate, she saw this painful experience as having a healing and transforming purpose. But for NDErs who have known only this kind of experience, it may leave feelings of despair and increased, rather than decreased, fear of death.

It may be significant that Holladay saw both her mirror experience and her mystical experience of the light as a return to conscious awareness of what had transpired during her brush with death 13 years before. Of this I will say more later.

Hellish Experiences

The third kind of case includes imagery of demons and/or hell. The experiencer feels victimized by malevolent entities wanting to drag her or him down into hell, or goes down into a pit, sees or hears the sufferings of tortured beings. There is often a pervading sense of evil that awakens great fear in the experiencer (Greyson and Bush, 1992). An example may be given from the writings of the 8th-century scholar Bede, cited in Carol Zaleski's *Otherworld Journeys* (1987). The NDEr, a pious Anglo-Saxon householder named Drythelm, succumbed to a severe illness and was met by a shining messenger who escorted him to a huge valley, one side aflame while the other side underwent a hailstorm. Countless souls were tossed back and forth between these torments. The guide explained that this was a place of temporary sufferings and that the souls therein could be released from these punishments by masses and prayers on the part of the living.

The guide then led Drythelm to hell through a land of darkness total except for the guide's light. Hell was a bottomless abyss, stinking and flaming. Damned souls were cast upward on the flames to fall back again amid the sounds of jeering laughter and grief. Malignant spirits dragged three souls into the abyss, and menaced Drythelm, but his guide rescued him.

After this Drythelm was led to a realm of light and joy, which included a walled paradisiacal meadow inhabited by many happy people, and approached heaven, which was similar and more wonderful still. However, despite his wish to remain, he was sent back. The aftermath of his experience was an exchange of his lifestyle for one of monastic austerity. Drythelm told his story to a monk, who

told it to Bede (Zaleski, 1987); it is, then, a thirdhand account, perhaps not totally accurate, but not the stuff of legend either.

This experience reflects cultural ideas of its period—afterdeath punishment in the form of purgatory and hell, demons, paradise, the authoritative spiritual leader, ideals of asceticism—yet it also bears unmistakable similarities to certain elements in 20th century experiences such as those of George Ritchie and Howard Storm. Ritchie's experience is familiar to many from his books *Return From Tomorrow* (Ritchie and Sherrill, 1978) and *My Life After Dying* (Ritchie, 1991), but I will summarize it for the benefit of those who have not yet encountered them.

Ritchie collapsed of pneumonia and was given up as dead while in military basic training in Texas in December, 1943. After a disembodied flight in the direction of his home state of Virginia, he returned to the scene of his body and had a vision of the light and of Christ. The figure of Christ led him to a series of earthly scenes in which he perceived various earthbound spirits trying unsuccessfully to interact with the living and to satisfy cravings for addictive substances. He also saw a dark area in which many spirits fought with one another or tried to satisfy distorted sexual cravings. All these beings were overshadowed by angelic figures who tried patiently to draw their attention to better things. Ritchie was also guided to a peaceful university-like setting, and saw but did not enter a celestial city before he was induced to return to his body.

Storm's experience was told in some detail in Judith Cressey's *The Near-Death Experience: Mysticism or Madness* (1994). After suffering prolonged agony from a perforated duodenum, Storm succumbed and was astonished to find himself standing by his bedside looking at his body. His wife and roommate failed to respond to him, and he reacted with anger. Then he was enticed by seemingly helpful entities through a doorway onto a darkening plain where they eventually attacked him savagely. They finally backed off protesting when, in response to the urging of an inner voice, he tried to pray. After a period of intense desolation (the void experience?), again in response to his own voice within, he called to Jesus for help and was rescued by a starlike angelic figure who surrounded him with love, took him among other loving beings, and taught him extensively (Storm, 1989). In these, as in the case of Drythelm, we note the journey through dark realms, angelic compassion for those suffering after death, violent entities, the power of prayer, the rescuing guide, light piercing the darkness, and scenes of pain giving way to scenes of bliss.

Entity-Centered vs. Fire-Centered Hellish Experiences

Drythelm's case presented both malicious entities and hellfire, as do some contemporary cases, thus seeming a particularly apt example of the hellish category. However, there are also cases such as Ritchie's and Storm's involving entities but no fire, and I propose that they be considered a separate subcategory, because some entities show distinct analogies to figures in certain more familiar situations, namely schizophrenia and nightmares. Rarely, they also intrude into radiant NDEs, as at the end of Betty Eadie's experience (Eadie and Taylor, 1992).

One source supporting such a connection is *The Presence of Other Worlds* by clinical psychologist Wilson Van Dusen (1974). In it he distilled the results of 16 years' investigation into the visionary (I avoid the word hallucinatory) figures perceived by schizophrenic patients. Taking the voices seriously and in many cases interviewing them through the patients, he found pervasive similarities among the entities. The majority, which he called "the lower order," manifested lies, inflated claims, threats, perseveration, malice, lack of distinct personal identities, masquerading, obsessions, and perverted sexuality; and all the lower order showed hostility toward anything to do with religion. About one-fifth of the visionary figures were, by contrast, loving and supportive, and offered profound symbolic wisdom (Van Dusen, 1974). I suggest this analogy not to dismiss these NDEs as incidents of psychosis, which they clearly are not, but to prepare the ground for paradigms that will relate these and other classes of experience.

As has been pointed out in the case of radiant NDEs, distressing NDE-like experiences also take place at times when there is no question of nearness to death. Persons in waking consciousness and normal health have experienced malevolent otherworldly entities. In one of the few contemporary cases I know, the experiencer, Gary Wells, was going through a period of psychological and spiritual distress. While alone at work during a night shift he appealed to God ". . . if you do exist, please let me know." In response he felt a powerful divine presence that gave him a strong sense of his own uncleanness, and commanded him to be holy. This command he resisted. An excruciating headache followed, then a sudden experience of blackness and "a dank, unearthly smell." He heard voices of two men abusing one another in

phony, foul language. There were more voices inside the blackness, but they were further away and faint. I felt a power like a vacuum pulling me into it further. As I moved toward the source, my speed increased proportionately. (G. Wells, personal communication, 1994)

He heard his own voice yelling to God for help, and suddenly the scene was gone. This was followed by a powerful, enlivening sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In another case, Norman Van Rooy as a child of 4 or 5 one evening heard his name called as he lay in bed before going to sleep.

There was a kind of humming . . . or throbbing sound like electricity in a transformer. . . . It had a malevolent intelligent magnetism that was almost hypnotic. . . . The sound was coming from the wall. As I watched in horror the wall opened up in several places near the floor and out of each opening came a creature. These were shaped like the bottom sides of goat's hooves. I felt helpless as they beckoned me to come with [them]. Between the cloven hooves from where their voices came a nexus of overwhelming magnetic malevolent intelligence pulsed with a fiery glow. They seemed to know me and were trying to pull me down with them. . . . This frightened me terribly and I called out for help to my mother who was in the next room. When she entered the room the entire scene disappeared. . . . When she left this event was repeated. I felt weaker and sensed I could not resist and would be sucked into their subterranean world. Again I cried out and again my mother's presence dispersed [them]. . . . I fell asleep. . . . The next night this was repeated. After that I never re-experienced anything remotely similar to it. (N. Van Rooy, personal communication, 1994)

The fact that Van Rooy's experience happened in bed in the evening may prompt some readers to interpret it as a nightmare. Unless one is given to reductionism, there is no reason to doubt that it was a waking experience just as he recounted it. There are, however, analogies between the experience and nightmares peopled by menacing figures, especially those that are not a processing of past traumas—which fact suggests that rather than his vision being "merely" a nightmare, the malevolent figures in certain nightmares may in fact be a form of the same kind of entity, possessing a kind of reality of their own.

Both these not-close-to-death experiences centered around evil entities and an evil force, and there is a hint of hellfire in the second one. But there are also cases, both NDEs and not-close-to-death experiences, that center around hellfire but have no entities, or whose entities lack power or malevolence. Rawlings cited two of them in *Beyond Death's Door* (1978). One was the case of Thomas Welch, who

fell from a trestle high over a dam. He found himself near the shore of an awe-inspiring lake of blue fire. Deceased persons he had known were there, looking bewildered and incredulous. He was rescued by the figure of Jesus, who turned and looked at him. Then he was back in his body.

One can also find accounts of hellfire-centered not-close-to-death experiences in the lives of saints and mystics. Teresa of Avila—who may have been an NDEr, having once been in a deathlike coma—while praying suddenly found herself in hell: a long narrow passage, whose ground was covered with malodorous mud full of reptiles, which led to a small cavity in a wall in which she was then confined. She suffered physical-seeming agonies of being both burned and dismembered, in terrible despair because of her conviction that this would be forever. She did not tell how she escaped (Teresa of Avila, 1957). I mention Teresa's case, which was quoted at some length in Christopher Bache's "A Perinatal Interpretation of Frightening Near-Death Experiences" (1994), because she also had a not-close-to-death experience in which a fiery spear pierced her heart; she interpreted the fire as divine love—a common image among Christian mystics—and found it both blissful and agonizing at once. I will develop some of the implications of this ambivalence below.

P.M.H. Atwater, in *Beyond the Light* (1994), noted that spinning vortices and other whirling patterns turn up in some distressing NDEs, as well as in her own radiant third NDE. Marcel Louis Forhan ("Yram"), who in his book *Le Medicin de l'Ame* (translated as *Practical Astral Projection*) described having out-of-body experiences virtually at will, mentioned vortex-like energies that would sweep his projected self away into sometimes unpleasant situations (Yram, 1974). With knowledge of more cases, we may find the vortex-centered distressing NDE to be a third subcategory.

The Empathetic Life Review

In addition to Greyson and Bush's three types, a possible fourth type of (partially) distressing NDE is the painful empathetic life review. The empathetic life review was described in Moody's *Reflections on Life After Life* (1977) in a chapter entitled "Judgment." He cited cases of persons who experienced not only every detail of their lives but also the impact of their lives on others. He suggested that people who have done great harm, such as perpetrators of the Nazi horrors,

seeing all the suffering they have caused, and by implication, *feeling* it, would undergo the worst sort of hell imaginable. Atwater, hardly a sinner in the Nazi league, also used the word "hell" to describe her empathetic life review, which included the effect of her life not only on other people but on animals, plants and the so-called inanimate world: "It was a reliving of the total gestalt of me as Phyllis, complete with all the consequences of ever having lived at all" (Atwater, 1988, p. 36).

Dannion Brinkley, in *Saved by the Light*, wrote that in his empathetic life review he not only received all the violent kicks and punches he had delivered in the thousands of fights of his youth, but felt the death-throes of the people he killed in Laos and Cambodia, the suffering of their families afterwards, and also the deaths of civilians killed in his presence by other military personnel (Brinkley and Perry, 1994). He also mentioned feeling the suffering of a dog he had once beaten for a minor misdeed, as well as the relief of a goat whom he had rescued from another's abuse.

To experience the effects of one's life may seem like an exact sort of recompense—perfect justice—for the Adolf Hitlers of this world. But "all the consequences of ever having lived at all" includes unintended consequences as well as future generations. Suppose we move back a generation: did Klara Hitler, a doting mother who lacked the courage to protect the child Adolf from the savage abuse of his father (Miller, 1990), deserve to experience the entire Holocaust and all the rest of the horrors of the war?

No returned NDEr has described in any detail a "ripple effect" of this magnitude, but the fact that most are limited does not mean that the ripple effect does have limits. It may be a preliminary form of the vision of knowledge that Moody's subjects and other NDErs described when they said things like "There was a period in which I knew everything." But knowing everything may be a decidedly mixed blessing. If the sins of the children, generation after generation, are visited upon the fathers and mothers, we have indeed a situation that often could rightly be called hell, though it is not exactly an otherworldly state but a retrospective hell on earth.

Otto's *Mysterium Tremendum*

The history of religions can be helpful in providing contexts for the phenomenon of distressing NDEs. Of particular value is the analysis of the German thinker Rudolf Otto presented in his classic

work *Das Heilige*, translated into English as *The Idea of the Holy* (1958). Otto's analysis is relevant to Greyson and Bush's three main types, but not to the empathetic life review.

He asserted that the essence of deity is not expressible in intellectually meaningful categories, but that so-called divine attributes are rationalizations applied to the human experience of the Holy, which is an encounter with a nonrational Something that he described as the *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the Dreadful and Fascinating Mystery. He coined the term "numinous," from the Latin *numen* = divinity, to express this sense of a felt presence that is so alien to our everyday world, so uncanny, that the mind that encounters it is struck with blank astonishment, with awe. The hair-raising feeling aroused by ghost stories is, wrote Otto, a degraded form of the response to the Mystery. It is because the Mystery is so totally Other that words fail to describe it.

The dreadful aspect of the numinous perception is not merely dread in the sense of fear of a this-worldly threat; it involves a shudder of supernormal horror, the feeling of the blood running cold. Otto saw an early expression of this kind of experience in the concept of the Wrath of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. In many passages it seemed clear that this Wrath had no concern at all with moral qualities; the ways in which it was aroused were baffling. It is "like a hidden force of nature, like stored-up electricity, discharging itself upon anyone who comes too near" (Otto, 1958, p. 19). But the term "wrath" is an image, wrote Otto, an attempt to understand the experience by applying the analogy of human anger.

Carrying the analysis further, Otto remarked that there is something enormous and overpowering about the Dreadful Mystery. By contrast, the human self is puny virtually to the point of nonexistence; one cannot even consider pitting oneself against it. Thirdly, there is an element of intense energy about the Dreadful Mystery. It is alive; it is at the furthest possible remove from mere philosophical abstractions. In some forms of mysticism it appeared as the " 'consuming fire' of love whose burning strength the mystic can hardly bear" (Otto, 1958, p. 24).

The same mysterious Something that arouses astonishment, awe, and dread also arouses a powerful fascination in the one who perceives it. The experiencer of this fascination "feels a strange rapture, rising often enough to the pitch of dizzy intoxication" (Otto, 1958, p. 31). As with wrath, the conceptions of this Fascinating Mystery as comfort or security or the joy of love are inadequate images

for the unutterable bliss it conveys. Many means are employed to seek out the Mystery, including magical operations and severe asceticism. One may begin by seeking it for what one has to gain by it, but will sooner or later seek it for its own sake (Otto, 1958).

Otto did not mention the near-death experience; his analysis was based on his study of traditional religious phenomena from many times and places. Yet his *Dreadful and Fascinating Mystery* described remarkably well the feeling tone of heavenly NDEs and hellish-type distressing NDEs. His analysis is helpful for our purposes for at least two reasons. One is that it validates the existence of hellish NDEs as part of a wider spectrum of baffling religious phenomena. The other is that he asserted from the outset that these phenomena are nonrational; he attempted to get below any interpretation and valuation to explore the nonrational core of the experiences.

In fact he did not quite succeed in getting beyond interpretation, as can be seen, for example, in his assumption that the *Dreadful* experiences and the *Fascinating* experiences are all encounters with the same reality. There are mystical experiences that clearly manifest both qualities, as in the case of Teresa's fiery spear, but in other cases, in which only the one or the other quality is present, it is not evident that both are of the same kind. Further, it must be admitted that in some NDEs the interpretation is not merely imposed in retrospect but is unmistakably part of the imagery of the experience. An example is the painful case of NDEr A.B., published in the newsletter of the Seattle LANDS group. Overwhelmed by darkness, a loud bell, and the screams of seeming thousands, badly frightened, she was warned that the sin of adultery in her life had led to this pass (A.B., 1991).

However, it is still profitable to follow Otto and regard interpretations of NDEs as at least to some extent secondary to the basic encounter, as this enables us to put various interpretations side by side and evaluate them. Interpretations are meaning structures, part of the overarching meaning structure that is a culture's worldview. The core principles of a meaning structure are selection and subordination; by this means patterns are shaped and perceived. Without necessarily being aware of it, when we look at a field of data, we see the polarity of figure and ground; for example, when we read we look at the black shapes on the page, ignoring the white configurations inside and around them.

Another important polarity is that of good and bad, which is obviously important when considering heavenly and hellish experiences. Complications arise, however, which will be considered later.

A third polarity of meaning structures is the real versus the illusory. For example, those who hold to the reigning scientific worldview in our culture explain away heavenly and hellish visions alike by calling them hallucinations, that is, claiming they are illusory. Many readers of this Journal would instead take an opposite tack, asserting that the heavenly NDEs, at least, are real. But there are also complications here which will be gone into later.

Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy took the lead in making Westerners aware that worldviews are created and sustained by human beings. This happens in thousands of complex and subtle ways; limited human beings cannot see reality bare without them. Some thinkers have assumed that this means that reality, as it is in itself, is chaotic, perhaps meaningless; certain psychedelic and mystical experiences, and the everlasting void type of distressing NDE, tend to foster this idea. But we need not commit ourselves to it; for all we know, reality itself may in fact approximate to some particular worldview, or a roughly accurate worldview may be gleaned by careful cross-cultural comparisons.

In any case, we cannot think without a worldview, and those who explore near-death studies have to fit distressing experiences into it somewhere if we are to be honest enough to admit their existence. For this reason I do not join Otto in calling the Dreadful and Fascinating Mystery simply nonrational, but will try to bracket the issue while I outline some basic interpretations of how the two kinds of experience relate to one another and to everyday life.

Types of Rational Paradigms for Explaining NDEs

Interpretations are largely of three kinds, which I will call the supernaturalistic, the reductionistic and the one-world types, my typology being developed from philosopher David Griffin's typology of philosophical animism and dualism (Griffin, 1993).

Supernaturalistic Paradigms

Supernaturalistic thinking has shaped the major Western religions and influenced the rise of modern science, so it is very familiar to us. Essentially, it gives us a crucial division: on the one hand a sovereign God and the world of pure spirits; on the other hand the public

physical world. God is all-powerful, and creates and rules everything in both worlds. Physical things are "dead" and can only react according to the physical laws God has set; they have no choice of any sort. But we human beings may choose to obey or disobey God's moral laws. To some extent we may get our rewards and punishments in this life, but that cannot be counted on; what can be counted on is heaven for the obedient or hell for the unrepentant after death. In this interpretation, then, to oversimplify, hellish NDEs reflect experience of a state that is God's work, the expression of his rage at human disobedience. If demons are involved, they are carrying out God's will.

A variant on this hell-as-punishment interpretation has already been noted in the case of Drythelm: purgatory, as a third state between heaven and hell. Here suffering still results from sin against God, but rather than being an expression of God's retaliatory anger, it is motivated by God's good will, with the purpose of purging sinners to fit them for heaven.

A second variant we saw exemplified in the fundamentalist interpretation cited above. Christian fundamentalism is a 20th-century development, arising out of 19th-century revivalism and the conflict with modern science, but it has roots in the ancient and medieval theologies of Paul, Augustine, and Anselm. It interprets Jesus' crucifixion as meaning that God's compassion sought to find a way to circumvent His wrath by providing the death of Jesus as a sacrifice to expiate for sin. All people are sinners deserving hell; living an apparently good life is not enough to get one to heaven. One must confess one's sins and spiritual helplessness, and turn to Jesus as Saviour, accepting His death on the cross as a substitute punishment for sins. This act makes it possible to go to heaven after death.

The corollary of this view is that all those who do not go through this Christian conversion process will go to hell, however good and admirable their lives may be; thus Rawlings' abovementioned view that the unconditional divine love of blissful NDEs is actually a deceit of the devil. It should be noted that a great many Christians who accept this interpretation do not accept the corollary, but leave the matter a mystery.

Reductionistic Paradigms

Interestingly enough, a supernaturalistic and authoritarian worldview akin to this actually led to the development of modern science

in the 17th century, and eventually to the reductionistic interpretation, as Griffin (1993) has pointed out. Rene Descartes is well-known (or notorious) for having articulated the philosophy of a basic bifurcation of mind and matter upon which the edifice of modern science was largely based. It was only when physical reality was thus seen as essentially inert and "dead," operating under principles and laws put into it at the beginning by God, that it could begin to be studied objectively and for its own sake.

But when matter and spirit were split off like this it became increasingly difficult to see how they were related at all. The reality and nature of the physical world became more and more impressively shown, but God and the human soul came to seem less and less real. They were also suspect because they were associated with repressive religious authority. The result was the creation of a reductionistic cultural climate in which it seems to most educated persons quite appropriate for NDE stories, including the hellish type, to be dismissed as hallucinations by medical and academic authorities who have scarcely looked into them.

One-World Paradigms

Most other interpretations of hellish experiences are of the one-world variety. According to this kind of worldview, which is the oldest, the spiritual and the physical are two dimensions of the same reality. For example, among many tribal peoples and with certain Renaissance thinkers, Gods, angels, demons, nature-spirits, the deceased, humans, animals, plants, and stones may differ greatly in degrees of power and consciousness, but as part of the same world are all essentially of the same *kind*. Every action has spiritual effects. Everything is alive to some extent, and energy may be seen as flowing through all things. For this reason religious ceremonies, magical operations, meditative states, blessings, and curses are powerfully efficacious, must be handled with care and under the proper circumstances.

For adherents of the reductionistic worldview, this kind of magical world is so much superstition, though underlying their scorn may be unacknowledged anxiety. It is also anathema to many supernaturalists, who tend to feel anxious outside the secure circle of a world governed by infallible religious authority, such as Scripture or Pope, giving forth the will of a sovereign Deity. The great flowering of one-

world outlook in the West came in the Renaissance; it struggled with, and was defeated by, authoritarian religion and modern science (Griffin, 1993). But it is blossoming again in our own times with New Age, ecological and mystical thought, and certain worldviews based on contemporary physics.

The Spiritualistic Paradigm. Perhaps the oldest interpretation of the one-world type is spiritualism, as many primordial peoples are spiritualists. Spiritualism received a powerful boost beginning with the well-known events in the house of the Fox sisters in New England in 1848, and is the basic outlook of many millions of people today, especially in Africa and Latin America. Though spiritualism is held in contempt in many academic circles, like any religion it ought to be regarded with an open mind.

One of the central tenets in this view is that human souls, as well as animal souls, survive death as a unit of consciousness. Since there are many human beings in the flesh who are evil, who will not be transformed simply by dying, it stands to reason that there are also many surviving evil spirits. There may also be evil entities who have never been in the flesh. In the various spiritualistic subworldviews, evil spiritual beings may become earthbound, influencing the living for ill, or may gravitate to a spiritual "lower astral" plane among others of their ilk.

In any case, the menacing beings who come to draw NDErs and not-close-to-death experiencers, the parasitic and angry beings witnessed by Ritchie, the sadistic ones who victimized Storm, are in this interpretation very much what they appear to be: real entities with an inner life of their own, if life it can be called. They relate by spiritual laws to one another and to the living. One basic law is that like is attracted to like: fear and hostility will attract angry spirits, love will attract loving ones. Another law, especially among modern Western spiritualists, is the principle of spiritual development. No being is purely evil; all have the potential to evolve from lower planes of darkness to higher planes of light and love. This usually requires the help of highly evolved compassionate beings, such as those in the distressing experiences cited above.

The Consciousness-as-Creator Paradigm. Another type of one-world interpretation, sometimes seen in conjunction with the spiritualistic, is the consciousness-as-creator interpretation. Tibetan Buddhism is a good example of this outlook, as may be seen in the well-known *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz, 1967; see also Ring, 1994). According to Buddhism there really is no such thing as a soul; the

self as a kind of spiritual kernel in the physical shell is an illusion. When we succeed in fully getting rid of the illusory ego, our consciousness realizes infinity and we are free from all the ills of individualized existence. According to this view, some of the figures seen in distressing NDEs may be ephemeral phantasms, but others such as the terrifying Buddhas in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz, 1957) may have a much more durable-seeming existence, having been created and sustained by generations of Tibetan Buddhists in meditation and in the afterdeath state.

The important thing is to realize that these entities, according to this view, maintain their power by our taking them at face value. When we refuse to do this, and see them as creations of consciousness, they lose their power over us. The dying person is often reminded in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz, 1957) that the terrifying Buddha of a particular sort is the same as the glorious one of that sort. When one overcomes one's fear and revulsion and accepts the demonic figure as a destroyer of the illusory ego, one is freed from the compulsion to reincarnate, and can definitively unite with the Clear Light of the Void. This interpretation is clearly applicable to inverted NDEs, especially those which become joyous after the experiencer changes his or her attitude.

From the consciousness-as-creator point of view, not only the demonic "welcoming committee" and the flaming pit, but even the traditional God who damns sinners to it have been brought into such existence as they have by the vengefulness and fears of generations of religious persons. Pain-giving though such entities may be, they are no more real than the ego that suffers them. When accepted as illusory, they can serve the same purpose as the terrifying Buddhas of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz, 1957), to destroy the ego and release one into the light.

The Mythical Paradigm. Another kind of one-world interpretation, linked to the above, may be called the "mythical" or "mythopoeic." The scholarship of Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949) and Northrop Frye in *The Secular Scripture* (1976) have given us a good deal of insight into this theme, which they have traced in myths, folktales, and literary works. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1974) and George Lucas' *Star Wars* film trilogy gave good examples of the scenario itself.

Essentially, the scenario presents us with a hero or heroine who begins in an ordinary, limited setting, unaware that she or he is of royal blood or possesses supernormal gifts. Something is wrong in

this world, according to Campbell; it is diseased or in some way doomed. To meet this need an event or messenger appears that calls out the hero or heroine. To those left behind, this departure amounts to a death. But far from really dying, he or she moves into a larger world full of extraordinary beauties and indescribable horrors. This is the "downward" action of the story, according to Frye.

At the nadir, the hero or heroine suffers excruciating pain, perhaps a tortured prisoner in a cave or dungeon, perhaps battling a horrifying monster or other enemy. This is the second death, the equivalent of hell. Then comes the "upward" movement: the hero or heroine is rescued or escapes the dungeon and defeats the enemy, who turns out to have been guarding a magnificent treasure. The heroic one eventually returns home, making the treasure available to her or his world and healing that world. There may be an enthronement or a royal marriage celebrating the new dawn of light and love, the new springtime (Campbell, 1949; Frye, 1976).

There are clear analogies between this storied hero-adventure and distressing NDEs: the downward movement, loss of identity, darkness, entrapment, pain and horror, demonic enemies, rescue, and return upward. The gaining of a wonderful treasure, briefly known in the joy of the light, is not often experienced as part of the NDE itself, though it was indeed part of the story in the cases of Storm and Drythelm. It may come in a separate NDE (Rawlings, 1978). More often the NDEr returns terribly shaken, and the potential for renewal is developed later in his or her resumed life.

The Western Mystical Paradigm. The final one-world kind of interpretation that I offer I will call the Western mystical path. I use this name because it is derived from studies of Christian mysticism, but in fact it also applies to some Eastern mysticism. It is based partly on not-close-to-death experiences.

Western academic scholarship on mysticism began about 100 years ago. The first and second generations of scholars were concerned to trace common themes among mystics of different traditions, in an attempt to gain insight into the nature of the Ultimate, the Divine, which all mystics were held to have experienced. Many contemporary scholars of mysticism are moving in a different direction, emphasizing the context-dependent nature of all mystical experiences and mystical accounts, and concluding that it is impossible to experience the Ultimate unconditionally, in that all spiritual experiences are influenced by cultural expectations (Katz, 1978, 1983). That all mystical accounts are culturally conditioned is a truth that needs to be

emphasized, but I am unconvinced that an agnostic view necessarily follows. In affirmation of the essentials of the position of the first-generation generalists, I will draw on the work of English scholar Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941).

In her mammoth study *Mysticism*, Underhill (1911) presented the mystic's path as a journey of five stages. This was her expansion of an ancient three-stage version of the path. It was an approximation summarized from the accounts of many Christian and a few Islamic mystics; she acknowledged that many mystics did not in fact fit it exactly. Some may have skipped a stage or reversed two stages, or the like.

Underhill's first stage was Awakening. The future mystic suddenly or gradually becomes aware of an unutterable splendor in the world, a loving divine Presence, occasionally of a supernormal terror. The awakening may take the form of perception of the light, of a psychedelic glory in nature, of a voice such as St. Francis heard from the crucifix of a ruined church; or it may be a seemingly ordinary event that resonates deep within. I compare this first stage to the situation of a person who has moved into a house in the desert. She or he goes out one morning after a rain to find that the desert has exploded into glorious bloom.

The first stage is wonderful but it doesn't last. The light has given the mystic new values and joys, but has also shown him or her up as having many dark corners within, unhealthy habits, false values, egotism, and unkindness, such as are so common.

The second stage, then, was Purgation. The mystic is no longer going the way of the world, and will have to gather the courage to look like a fool at times, often to do things that alienate loved ones. It will often mean setting up a regime of prayer or meditation and following it even when one feels "dry" and unrewarded. The ancient and medieval Christian mystics Underhill studied also tended to have a strong bias against the body, and their Purgation activities include abusing themselves in ways most of us would consider unhealthy. But even without that, Purgation is a time of dislocation, gruelling work, and considerable pain. In the image of my desert-dweller, Purgation means building a garden around one's house. It involves laboring under the hot sun, digging wells and irrigation channels, planting, weeding, and fertilizing.

The third stage was Illumination. The work of Purgation begins to bear flowers and fruits; there is a deep sense of divine presence much of the time; prayer or meditation bring deep strength and joy.

Paranormal gifts may appear. Love for the world flows through one. The desert-dweller has many happy hours sitting in the shade of her or his garden, enjoying the blossoms and the fruits. The second and third stages may take the form of more or less rapid alternations back and forth, a situation some mystics have called the Game of Love, and in fact such a mixture of work and gratification prevails with gardening much of the time, too.

The fourth stage was the Dark Night of the Soul. The pain of this stage is worse than anything dreamed of in Purgation. The divine presence is gone, evidently forever. The mystic feels categorically rejected by God, alienated from all friends and family members, with no identity, with a burning thirst for the love once known. Evil thoughts may come and obsess one; demonic figures may taunt or torture.

The Dark Night, which seems so final to the mystic, is not in fact the last word. It transmutes, sooner or later, into the Unitive State, a sustainedly blissful condition that still oddly bears some of the characteristics of the Dark Night. There is no need for particular times or places of religious observances. There are no particular friends or loved ones, perhaps not even a sense of greater kinship with people than with animals or stones; recall St. Francis with his Sisters the Birds and Brother Sun. The mystic never regains his or her lost identity as a religious person. But none of this is needed, for the darkness and the light turn out somehow to be the same thing. There is no need for the house and garden to be rebuilt, for everywhere is home. To paraphrase William Blake, "Every grain of sand a gem/Resplendant with the Light Divine" (Williams, 1952, p. 232). Or, as in the renowned line from the Koran, "Whithersoever you turn, there is the face of God" (Arberry, 1955, p. 42).

Meaning, which involves selection and subordination, is almost wholly discarded, for all is an ocean of glory. I might add that Underhill saw the mystic in the Unitive State as speaking absolutely reliable truth, as offering unlimited divine love. But here the point of Steven Katz (1978, 1983) and his colleagues is salient: one may affirm that such a mystic does possess great power and wisdom without necessarily having transcended humanness, or indeed the concepts of her or his culture. In short, sometimes he or she is idiosyncratic, or just wrong!

I repeat that most mystics do not take the five stages in neat order. And the possibility that this path is in essentials equivalent to the path of profoundly transformed NDErs, which I believe it is, may

help to explain why persons who have undergone distressing NDEs may be blocked for a long time from entry into the Unitive State, especially if they lack spiritual guidance, and that some persons who have had blissful NDEs may appear to have moved from Awakening through some form of Purgation and Illumination into the Unitive State or its equivalent without a Dark Night of the Soul.

Mystical and near-death experiences so often involve a sense of time having disappeared, as to suggest that the painful and the blissful experiences—indeed, all events—somehow happen at the same time. For example, we noted above that Holladay interpreted her painful mystical experience with the mirror in 1987 as a delayed unfolding of certain dimensions of her presumed NDE of 13 years earlier. If this is the case, they then merely appear to our limited embodied consciousness in an order more or less meaningful to us. It is possible that some “stages” may not become apparent until after one has left the flesh.

The Dark Night of the Soul and the Distressing NDE

Since this paper deals particularly with painful NDEs, I wish to concentrate here on the claimed analogy or identity between stage four, the Dark Night, and distressing NDEs. Many examples could be chosen. I will sketch the experiences and reflections of three mystics, George Fox, Juan de la Cruz (John of the Cross), and Jacob Boehme, and compare them respectively to the demon-haunted NDE, the everlasting-void NDE, and the hellfire-NDE.

George Fox and the Demon-Haunted NDE

George Fox (1624-1691), co-founder of the Society of Friends (Quakers), may actually have been an NDEr, as on at least two occasions he underwent trances so deep that those about him were uncertain whether he was living or dead. He had visions of the divine light not only in trance, appearing as an ocean, but in his waking state, as stars or sparks in human hearts and in the earth. These perceptions of the light were so important to his ministry that the Inner Light is still the central image for the Divine in the Society of Friends.

During one of his prolonged altered states of consciousness, which took place during the national turmoil of the breakdown of the English Commonwealth in 1658, "a company of evil spirits" came and harrassed him (Fox, 1952, p. 356). Little detail is given about this experience. In a more severe ordeal of this sort in 1670, during a period of violent persecution of Friends, Fox suffered blindness and deafness in an altered state of consciousness over a period of several months. "And great sufferings I was under at this time beyond words to declare, for I was come into the deep, and the men-eaters were about me and I warred with their spirits" (Fox, 1952, p. 571).

This rather obscure passage may be clarified by comparing it with another one two pages later in which the term "men-eater" is applied to some of the clergy of the Established Church. Fox's denunciation of greed and exploitation in high places aroused the wrath of powerful church leaders who were profiting from the status quo; some of them were behind the current persecution. Fox referred to them as "men-eaters" who "preached peace to people if they put [food] into their mouths and fed them, but if not they gnawed their flesh off to the bone and chopped them for the cauldron" (Fox, 1952, p. 573).

The "spirits" of the "men-eaters" who tormented Fox in his trance may then refer either to these living people who were torturing him telepathically, or the devils that were motivating them to do so. This interpretation is in keeping with many incidents in Fox's life that we would class as paranormal, including clairvoyance, telepathy, psychokinesis, healing, and the like. In any case, whatever the ontological nature of these perceived evil spirits, Fox's reaction to them was one of fierce warfare, in contrast to his nonviolent stance in regard to his enemies in the flesh.

In common with many of his time and place, Fox had interpreted the upheavals of the 1640s and '50s as signs that the end of the world was upon Christendom. But by 1658 and especially by 1670 it had become apparent to him that the Judgment and the final victory of Christ over the dark forces, which he had thought to be imminent, were not taking place. It is possible that Fox's ordeals also partook of the nature of disillusionment corresponding to the breakdown of belief we have seen to be characteristic of the Dark Night, although he did not say so.

During this same prolonged period of altered consciousness Fox also had blissful visions of the New Jerusalem, which he understood to be both a present reality in the depths of the soul and an image of the transformed world soon to come. The vision of this City of

Light was a strong reaffirmation of the heart of his faith that, despite persecution and disappointment, the light and spirit present in all persons would come to consciousness in all and be vindicated. It should be noted also that he understood this vindication to be a state of consciousness of universal dimensions, which he called the Day of Christ: "In his day all things are seen, visible and invisible" (Fox, 1952, p. 29). It is the dispelling of ignorance and awakening from sleepy stupor to awareness of all things. There is an evident analogy to what Moody (1977) called the "vision of knowledge."

Fox affirmed the existence of hell as the final state of the unrepentant. He did not see them as totally cut off from God, for the Inward Light cannot be put out. Rather their sufferings in hell are the inevitable result of their own continued war against the light and spirit within, which evokes the spirit's condemnation. One might say that they are punished not so much by God as by the nature of reality. It should be noted that, far from being the victim of a schizophrenic disorder such as his tales of demons might suggest to a reductionistic thinker, Fox was a brilliant exegete of the Bible, a powerful preacher, a competent organizer, and was totally fearless in the face of mob and judicial violence.

Juan de la Cruz and the Everlasting Void NDE

The Spaniard Juan de la Cruz (1546-1591) was a mystic of a substantially different style, to whose poetry and writings of spiritual guidance we owe the term "the Dark Night of the Soul." Less interested in spiritual knowledge than Fox, or in action toward social justice, he was oriented toward the soul's personal union of love with God. This was to be achieved by rigorous processes of self-stripping until one has emptied oneself utterly. The various stages of this process he referred to as so many forms of the Dark Night: the Dark Night of Sense and Desire, the Active Night of the Spirit, the Active Night of Memory and Will, the Passive Night of the Senses, and the Passive Night of the Spirit. These stages became progressively more terrible until they finally gave way to the Spiritual Marriage, which was his chief image for the Unitive State (John of the Cross, 1946, pp. xxv-xxix).

The Dark Night of Sense and Desire had as its aim the detachment of the mystic from all gratifications of sense, from all created things. Juan referred particularly to cravings for food, which he probably

meant literally as well as symbolically: "the bread of angels is not given to, neither is it meant for, that palate which is pleased with the bread of man" (John of the Cross, 1946, p. 7). As further examples of things to be given up he lists "much talking, certain attachments . . . such as to individuals, to a book or a cell, to a particular food, to . . . science, news, and such things" (John of the Cross, 1946, p. 10). The mystic was also to give up the gratification of being well-regarded, and must disparage himself. This sacrifice of physical gratifications can be compared to the acceptance of the cutoff from the physical world that takes place in peaceful NDEs, with the significant difference that for Juan and his mystical followers, physical life was not usually interrupted.

The Dark Night of Sense and Desire Juan compared to dusk, when there is still some light to see by. The Active Night of the Spirit, by contrast, is total darkness. It has to do not with affairs of the body and the social self, but with God and spiritual things. One must give up not only reason and understanding, but the spiritual meditations and devotional practices that had given spiritual delight earlier. He compared this state to Jesus' cry of dereliction on the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). All our conceptions of God must be given up. This stricture applies not only to language and visualizations but to visions of saints and angels, perceptions of light, touch, fragrance, and the like.

Juan acknowledged that such experiences may be from God, but they may also be from the devil; even if they were from God, to reject them does not offer wrong to God, because "the fruit that He desires to bring forth in the soul" will take place just as well when one walks only by faith (John of the Cross, 1946, pp. 22-24). There is little doubt but that Juan would be unimpressed by radiant NDEs, whether visions of the light, of Christ, of angels, of paradise, or whatever. He granted that such things had their uses for beginners, but the maturing soul must leave behind all images and learn to wait quietly upon God in the darkness.

The Active Night of Memory and Will was a condition in which one willed to forget all knowledge of all things gained through the senses. "The memory must be stripped and emptied of all this knowledge and of these forms; it must labour to destroy all sense of them . . . as completely as if they had never entered into it . . . if it is to be united with God" (John of the Cross, 1946, p. 53).

The Passive Night of the Senses was a state of emptiness that came over the mystic, who "find[s] no comfort in the things of God,

and none also in created things." Juan, as did Johannes Eckhart and Jan van Ruysbroeck and Teresa before him, referred to this condition as dryness, and a favorite image for it is the desert, as aforementioned. "The cause of this dryness is that God is transferring to the spirit the goods and energies of the senses, which, being not unable to assimilate them, become . . . parched up, and empty" (John of the Cross, 1946, p. 81).

But the spiritual contemplation that has begun is still so dim that the person is not aware of it. This Passive Night of the Senses is very distressing to the soul, who fears being lost spiritually, and feels forsaken by God because prayer and meditation on holy things, which before were so rewarding, now mean nothing. Some mystics also suffer painful trials: "the angel of Satan" is sent to them, "to buffet them with horrible and violent temptations" (John of the Cross, 1946, p. 89). Despite appearances, these trials have a purgative purpose, according to Juan.

The Passive Night of the Spirit is the hardest of all, with "terrible torments" that prepare the soul for the supreme union. This darkness is in fact "a certain inflowing of God into the soul," an intense purity and brightness, but because the soul is still imperfect and impure, the light transcends the soul's capacity and is perceived as darkness. The soul's wretchedness is fully revealed, leading to utter misery. The

greatest affliction of the sorrowful soul in this state is the thought that God has abandoned it, of which it has no doubt; that He has cast it away into darkness as an abominable thing. It has also the same sense of abandonment with respect to all creatures. (John of the Cross, 1946, pp. 94-96)

The analogy between this sense of abandonment and the terrible aloneness of the void cases is unmistakable.

Another aspect of the Passive Night of the Spirit Juan expressed with the image of the "dark fire of love": "The soul begins to burn in the darkness." This is God's love and the soul's love at the same time. It is a wound, yet at the same time is sometimes "an inward strength," whose working the soul cannot understand (John of the Cross, 1946, pp. 102-103). The intensity of desire for God is such that the mystic may disregard all considerations, and do strange and extravagant acts. Juan expressed this recklessness in his well-known poem "Noche Oscura [On a Dark Night]," in which the narrator,

"starving for love and deep in flame," stole out of her house in the darkness to find and lie with her lover (John of the Cross, 1972, pp. 38-41). In violently puritanical Spain, by such an act she risked her life and gave over all identity and human connection except that with her lover.

Juan described no single dramatic movement from the deepest darkness of the Night to the bliss of spiritual union. Just as the approach of the Night was gradual, through the twilight of the Passive Night of the Senses, the approach of ultimate fulfilment is through the dimness of predawn. Suffering begins to give way to intermittent experiences of joy in the divine presence, and an awareness of the presence of God in all things. Juan called this stage the spiritual betrothal. It is followed by the spiritual marriage of uninterrupted union:

This is, beyond all comparison, a far higher state than that of betrothal, because it is a complete transformation into the Beloved; whereby they surrender each to the other the entire possession of themselves in the perfect union of love, wherein the soul becomes divine, and, by participation, God, so far as it is possible in this life. (John of the Cross, 1946, p. 167)

When we compare these descriptions to the sketch of the everlasting void type of NDE given above, several analogies become evident. Most obvious is the darkness, a figure of speech for the poet Juan, a perceived reality for the NDEr. Darkness as symbol has several meanings: inability to see one's way by the light of reason; anxiety or terror; inability to relate to the everyday world, from which one has become separated. The desert/outer space image conveys sterility, emptiness, terrible thirst, and longing for one's source of love. This is the Nothing. There may be difficulty in remembering one's past, and mockery by mechanistic entities, analogous to Juan's "angel of Satan," as in one of the void cases cited by Greyson and Bush (1992).

Contemporary NDEs go one step beyond Juan in conveying a sense that ordinary life with all values is meaningless and a delusion. In both cases the sufferer is convinced that her or his dereliction is permanent. In both cases, however, this turns out to be not the case. Juan showed that the experience was in fact a stage, an initiatory ordeal. NDErs are returned to the everyday world, and some of them come to see their ordeal in ways analogous to Juan's conception.

Jacob Boehme and the Hellfire NDE

Boehme (1575-1624), a German mystic of Lutheran persuasion, used imagery of darkness as did Juan, but it was imagery of fire that he developed in great depth. Fire had no single meaning consistently throughout his writings, which were produced over a period of some twenty years, but a certain pattern can be traced throughout.

For Boehme fire was not a means by which God punished the wicked in hell, although Boehme did affirm the reality of hell as the abode of the unrepentant. Fire represented rather the basic energy of all life and all creation. "It is life's first principle, the soul's first root" (Stoudt, 1968, p. 115). For Boehme, all began with a dark Nothing that was incipiently Something but was not conscious of that Something. The Nothing was totally formless; Boehme also called it the Unground and the Abyss. This Nothing desires and seeks, its impassioned search being the original Fire. "The Nothing reaches to Something and discovers itself in it. It is an eye that sees itself in its own reflection looking back" (Boehme, 1978, p. 18). That which it sees, the Something or the Ground of the Abyss, it desires with the burning flame of love.

Out of this basic dialectical movement the Trinity was born, said Boehme. All things that potentially exist were known in the divine self-contemplation. This eternal creativity was expressed in the figure of the Virgin Sophia, divine wisdom, the celestial body of God, who was like a mirror in which the forms of all things were to be seen. Sophia was called a virgin because she represented not the blazing energy of fire but the blissful peace and total consciousness of light. The fire longs for the light, and the light needs the energy of the fire. In the true divine nature, the fire and the light are united in perfect balance, which Boehme called the *temperamentum*, the divine love-play, the coincidence of opposites (Boehme, 1978, p. 19).

The myriad of things that God conceived in wisdom came into separate existence in a flash by God's creative *fiat*. Adam, the androgynous human being, was the highest point of creation, made to the image of God in Sophia; the angels were also created. Here we have the Three Principles or Three Worlds: the Eternal Fire, the Eternal Light, and the world of physical creatures that they reflect and generate. Every creature contains both the fire and the light within itself.

Together with the coming-into-existence of the creatures, the catastrophe of the Fall took place. The angel Lucifer disrupted the mys-

terious balance of the coincidence of opposites by his attempt to hold the knowledge of the world as his own possession, and thus to rule the power of the fire. Adam also overreached and fell, going to sleep as one and awaking as two, as male and female. As a result of these acts of possessiveness, pride, and loss of consciousness, the fire and the light were separated and came to be at war with one another. Lucifer then knew the fire as hell, as the agonizing Wrath of God.

Human beings also become subject to divine wrath, the fire within, though they may not be aware of it as such during their lifetimes. The human being in the fallen world experiences the fire as intense desires for physical things, for prestige, power, and other vanities. He is like the prodigal son who abandoned his wealthy and loving father and, starving in a far country, tried to fill his belly with the husks meant for the pigs. He does not know that he still also has the light hidden within, that God longs for his return.

On fire with love, God mercifully provided a way for this return. Christ came into the world as a full manifestation of the light of love; he brought the *Tinctur*, an alchemical concept of a transforming substance. The *Tinctur* is the fire as transforming power, which is able to change the fire-as-wrath into the fire-as-love. By his suffering and death Christ broke the power of the physical world that imprisoned the human soul (Boehme, 1978, pp. 238, 248).

These means of salvation come home to the soul when he awakens from his sleep and sin and finds that Sophia has come to his door, knocking for admission and offering to be reunited with him in love. The soul admits her with joyful amazement and experiences her marvelous kiss. The soul and Sophia are betrothed—note that the Betrothal happened at the beginning of the spiritual life with Boehme, in contrast to Juan's idea that it happened near the end—but she does not offer the ultimate fulfillment of marriage yet. She withdraws and leaves the soul to live by faith until the appointed time.

The returning soul has to go the hard way of repentance, of total resignation to the will of God, of learning to detach himself from desire for all physical things and other vanities. The fire of human desire now focuses rather on Sophia as the face of God. The soul looks for the day of marriage with Sophia after this life, when she will give him the ultimate gift of bliss, the Pearl of Great Price (Boehme, 1978, pp. 56-62). Beside the individual consummation, an ultimate consummation of the world will take place, in which all things will be revealed.

Integration

Here we have three examples of one-world views that unite traditional Christian ideas of salvation with conceptions of the Ultimate, as intimately linked to the basic imagery that appears repeatedly in both mystical and near-death experiences: the void, the fire, and the light. For both Juan and Boehme, the void was not ultimate meaninglessness, but the Divine as seen, so to speak, from the back. Likewise, rather than the fire and the light being irreconcilable hell and heaven, they were presented as integral to the nature of things, as necessarily experienced at different stages in the spiritual journey that climaxed in the ultimate union with the light, or, for Boehme, in the coincidence of fire and light as perfect love.

Boehme also in effect brought the fire down to everyday life, showing that it was what underlay the intense desire for physical things and other vanities that prevails among unawakened souls, and the frustration of which leads to violence. Fox also linked desire for gain with violence, although he did not use the fire image in this connection. Our three mystics, like virtually all other mystics and most NDErs, stressed the importance of essential detachment from such goods and from dependent relationships; true earth-life derives its energy from the Divine within.

One need not necessarily be committed to the Christian scenario that was part of their world—though it is well to be aware that Christian spirituality does possess such resources—to find their musings richly suggestive. One possibility would be to unite some such one-world interpretation of distressing NDEs with an affirmation of the varyingly real existence of the spirit-figures, both the loving and the malevolent, of NDE welcoming committees. Such a position can be consonant with the view that the human consciousness has a part in creating what it sees in such states. I find helpful the *persona* theory of parapsychologist Hornell Hart, delineated in his book *The Enigma of Survival* (1959).

Hart surveyed a variety of evidential spontaneous and mediumistic cases in which communication with spirits of the dead appeared to have taken place. He also considered objections that had been raised, such as the fact that certain mediumistic communicators had proven to be fictitious, and the fact that some apparitions had been of persons who were still alive. He proposed that an intelligence that had survived death may have cooperated with the unconscious minds of a medium and with his or her sitters (clients) to create a *persona*,

a dramatized entity who was telepathically sensitive both to the messages the surviving intelligence wished to convey, and to the ideas and presumptions of the living persons involved. Such a theory would help to explain the fact that NDErs sometimes see evidential welcomers, such as persons who have recently died without the NDErs' knowledge, as well as the fact that some visionary figures, such as Betty Eadie's Adam and Eve, though they may have a reality of their own, cannot be taken at face value (Eadie and Taylor, 1992).

In regard to the demonic "welcomers" of distressing NDEs, according to this position they may be ephemeral fictional entities, or they may be self-conscious evil discarnate beings, or something between; but they are labile, and the unconscious influence of the NDEr upon them is extensive. Van Rooy, for example, in his sophisticated analysis of his experience, traced the goat-hoof shape of his demonic intruders to earlier scenes of his life in India, where he examined the hooves of slaughtered goats (N. Van Rooy, personal communication). Further, the perceived demonic beings will gain in substantiality and malevolent energy if the NDEr responds to them with fear and/or hostility; Fox's violent reaction to the "men-eaters" may help to explain why his trance lasted so long.

In such a case it is almost impossible for the spiritually undeveloped NDEr to escape without help from outside, in the form of divine or angelic manifestations—which, again, will be partly shaped by the NDEr. Those who have been schooled in the Buddhist consciousness-as-creator worldview are in a better position to deal with such situations. Margot Grey cited the Indian case of a young man in an altered state similar to a distressing NDE, who had been prepared by a spiritual director to stand fast and show no fear in the face of menacing figures. He was able to do this when threatened by a visionary tiger, and in fact it shrank to the size of a domestic cat and turned away (Grey, 1985).

An alternative approach, based on an affirmation of some demonic beings as partially "real," would be to offer them nonviolent love. I have not heard of any NDEs in which this was tried, nor indeed of any mystical experiences, though St. Isaac the Syrian advocated compassion for demons (Isaac the Syrian, 1989, p. 12). In the major Western religious traditions, the vast majority of those who affirm the reality of evil spirits do not seek their redemption. I have heard of a dream in which it was tried, and the menacing figure turned into a steel butterfly (Anonymous, personal communication); Forhan also used it successfully in his out-of-body experiences (Yram, 1974).

There is the basic practical difficulty that to express nonviolent love in a situation of intense menace requires advanced spiritual development, while NDEs, as Bush (1993) has pointed out, usually happen to amateurs!

It should be noted that psychotherapists who are members of the Association for Past-Life Research and Therapies do practice something analogous to this. They interpret certain common psychological disorders as due to or related to the presence of unhealthy surviving spirits of the dead who have attached themselves to the clients. The clients are treated by a nonviolent de possession therapy that focuses on making the attached entities aware of their situation and encouraging them to let go, to perceive the presence of deceased loved ones, and to go off with the latter into the light. Unlike the faceless and almost interchangeable entities that Van Dusen found in schizophrenia, these entities have names, personalities, and life stories, and in some cases were related to the clients in life. Therapists using the technique claim a high rate of success. Moody has upon occasion collaborated with members of this group (Fiore, 1987).

In the title of this essay I referred to distressing NDEs as photographic negatives. Most persons who discover the existence of these experiences refer to them spontaneously as negative; Bush and other experiencers who have become aware of their complexity and their potential as means of transformation have repeatedly urged that such condemnatory terms be avoided. My title affirms the substance of this critique and provides, one might say, a *Tinctur* for the unhappy word. The photographic negative gives the true picture with values reversed, but it is a necessary stage in the coming-into-existence of the final picture. I like to think that Boehme, with his profound concern for the cosmic viewing of one's own image in the process of coming into the Ultimate, would have approved.

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Expanding Grof's Concept of the Perinatal: Deepening the Inquiry into Frightening Near-Death Experiences

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ABSTRACT: This study suggests that in order to explain the phenomenology of perinatal experience, as described in the work of Stanislav Grof, we must hypothesize that the patient in these instances has expanded beyond the individual subject. Rupert Sheldrake's concept of morphic fields is incorporated to suggest that the patient in these sessions might best be conceptualized as the species itself, or the morphic field of the species mind. Possible explanations for Grof's tilt toward personal psychology in his presentation of perinatal dynamics are explored. The implications of this expansion of perinatal theory for understanding frightening near-death experiences is summarized.

In a previous paper in this Journal, I proposed a perinatal interpretation of frightening near-death experiences (NDEs), arguing that all three forms of frightening NDEs—inverted, hellish, and meaningless void experiences—can be understood as rooted in the perinatal level of consciousness (Bache, 1994). In that project, Stanislav Grof's formulation of the perinatal dimension was accepted as it stood and applied to the problem of frightening NDEs. I wish to deepen that analysis by now turning a critical eye to Grof's concept of the perinatal itself. I will critique Grof's description of the perinatal level of consciousness and propose an expansion of the concept. If successful,

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this exercise in transpersonal theory will in turn deepen our understanding of the dynamics of frightening NDEs.

In his many books, Grof has documented the perinatal level of consciousness as a domain in which the personal and transpersonal dimensions intersect and blend in a complex fashion. While never allowing the perinatal to be conceptualized reductively as the mere reliving of one's biological birth, his analysis of perinatal dynamics has nevertheless listed strongly toward the personal side of the equation, leaving important transpersonal dynamics unexplained. The purpose of this study is to attempt to correct this imbalance by suggesting a rationale for the appearance of transpersonal phenomena in perinatal experiences that goes beyond Grof's formulation. Toward this end I will identify a set of questions left unaddressed in Grof's account and will draw upon Rupert Sheldrake's theory of formative causation and morphic fields to outline answers to these questions. This expansion of theory will not negate Grof's detailed and powerful analysis of the Basic Perinatal Matrices, but is intended as a step toward a more balanced account of this complicated domain. If we can advance Grof's discussion, it is only because we live in an intellectual environment that his many books have helped create.

The Problem

There is a subtle ambiguity in Grof's account of the perinatal that runs throughout his books. On the one hand, perinatal experience is defended as being a category of experience that is *sui generis* and not reducible to personal categories (Grof, 1975, 1980, 1988), while on the other hand the burden of Grof's explanation of perinatal experience lists decidedly in the direction of personal psychology. He has demonstrated that perinatal experience intertwines personal and transpersonal experiences and represents a dynamic interpenetration of these two levels of consciousness. We would expect, therefore, that a complete explanation of perinatal experience would be balanced between these two modes, that it would explain as much in one direction as it does in the other. What we find, however, is an explanation that works out the logic of the personal side of perinatal experience in considerably greater detail than the transpersonal side. No matter how many times he reminds us that perinatal experiences cannot be reduced to the birth trauma, the sheer volume of explanation that he provides in that direction cannot help but leave the reader thinking

of the perinatal disproportionately in terms of biological birth. The very name "perinatal" reinforces this tendency.

Indeed, Grof's phrasing in key passages supports this inclination. For example, in *Beyond the Brain* (1985), he writes: "The central element in the complex dynamics of the death-rebirth process seems to be reliving the biological birth trauma" (p. 140). If the birth trauma is "central," then the transpersonal components of perinatal experience are not central and must represent some sort of overlay on this more fundamental core. This is not, in fact, a mere semantic lapse but accurately reflects the general direction of Grof's analysis. He convincingly demonstrates that the patterns of physical and psychological perinatal symptomatology mirror in a condensed and overdetermined fashion the experiences of the fetus before, during, and after delivery. Meanwhile, the logic of the appearance of transpersonal perinatal experiences is not explained except as constituting an experiential parallel to biographical experience. Even while acknowledging that individual subjects may experience the perinatal level almost entirely in philosophical or spiritual terms, the thrust of Grof's analysis to date is to see biographical experiences as forming the thematic core of perinatal experience and to view transpersonal experiences as drawn in through a form of thematic resonance.

Because this is an important point, let me allow Grof himself to make it. Of the many places where he discusses the complex relation of transpersonal and personal elements in perinatal experience, the most complete account appears in *The Adventure of Self-Discovery* (1988). After reminding the reader that the perinatal process transcends biology and that we must avoid the trap of seeing birth as an all-explanatory principle, he goes on to summarize various transpersonal aspects of perinatal experience. He describes the unconscious at the perinatal level as being organized into highly condensed systems (COEX systems) that store our experiences in thematically congruent clusters. Here he writes:

The perinatal unfolding is also frequently accompanied by transpersonal experiences, such as archetypal visions of the Great Mother or the Terrible Mother Goddess, hell, purgatory, heaven or paradise, identification with animals, and past incarnation experiences. As it is the case with the various associated COEX systems, the connecting link between these transpersonal phenomena and the BPM's is similarity of the emotions or physical sensations involved. . . . Identification with the fetus in various stages of the birth process seems to provide selective access to themes in the transpersonal domain that involve similar emotional states and psychosomatic experiences.

Some of these themes have the form of archetypal sequences; others depict situations from the collective memory banks of humanity, or even from the holographic archives of nature related to the animal, vegetable, or mineral kingdoms. (pp. 10-11)

This explanation, however, left an important problem unaddressed: namely, what therapeutic role do these experiences have? Why should persons who are engaging unresolved fetal trauma get involved in torturous experiences of collective suffering or excruciatingly painful archetypal sequences? In asking this question, I am assuming, of course, that these experiences do in fact have a therapeutic function, that their appearance is not simply accidental or random. This assumption seems warranted by the consistency with which these thematically related experiences have surfaced at approximately the same point in the therapies of thousands of subjects. Grof's explanation that persons are drawn into these experiences through the similarity of emotional content or physical sensations helps us understand *how* this happens but not *why*. He documents that these painful encounters are extremely beneficial for the individuals involved, as they are part of the death-rebirth experience, but by itself this is not a sufficient explanation of the phenomenon. It leaves unanswered the fundamental question: Why should the engagement of collective suffering of this magnitude be part of an individual's death-rebirth process at all?

The press to answer this question comes from the fact that the levels of suffering reached in these transpersonal episodes are many times greater than anything deriving from the personal level of the psyche. Even taking into account the compounding effect of COEX systems (Grof, 1975), transpersonally rooted perinatal pain is so much more severe than personally rooted perinatal pain as to represent a quantum jump in agony.

An example will help illustrate this point. The following account, not previously published, came from the perinatal segment of an advanced high-dose lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) session of a well-educated professional:

I was caught up in a horror that I am incapable of describing with any accuracy. It was a raging insanity, a surging kaleidoscopic field of chaos, pain, and destruction. It was as if the entire human race had gathered from all corners of the globe and gone absolutely stark raving mad. They were attacking each other with a rabid savagery augmented by science fiction technology. There were many currents crossing and crisscrossing in front of me, each composed of thousands of people, some currents killing in multiple ways, some being

killed, some fleeing in panic, others being rounded up, others witnessing and screaming in terror, others witnessing and having their hearts broken by a species gone mad—and “I” was *all* their experiences. I was not me in any personal sense but had expanded to include thousands, even millions of persons. The magnitude of the deaths and the insanity is impossible to describe. Every time I try even now, I break down in tears.

I keep trying to conceptually grasp the content of the pain and I keep failing. The problem is finding a frame of reference. The only categories I have available to me are simplistic approximations that can give only a vague sense of it. The suffering comprises all of human history. It is at once species-specific and archetypal. It comprises the wildest science fiction worlds of horror beyond your imagination. It involves not only human beings but billions and billions of pieces of matter in agonizing galactic explosions. Horror beyond any scope. It is a convulsing of the human species, a convulsing of the universe. Floating through it were scenes of tragic suffering caused by nature and human indifference. Thousands of starving children from around the globe, their bodies bloated in death, their eyes staring out blankly at a humanity that was killing them through systemic ecological abuse and human neglect. Lots of violence between men and women—rape, beatings, intimidation, retaliation—cycles and cycles of destruction.

When one is immersed time and again through many sessions into torment such as this, one must answer the question: “Why is this happening? How is this a meaningful part of my therapeutic process?” The absence of an answer to this question, indeed, the absence of the question itself stands in stark contrast to the depth of explanation Grof provides for the personal roots of the perinatal ordeal. On this side of the ledger, his analysis is subtle and penetrating. It is on the transpersonal side that his presentation, as rich and detailed as it is, is incomplete.

Let me insert a brief clarification. Past incarnation experiences represent a complicated intermediate case between personal and transpersonal phenomena. On the one hand, they are transpersonal—and this is how Grof classified them—because they reach beyond the personal body/mind identity of the present incarnation. On the other hand, they are unlike many other transpersonal experiences in that they constitute part of one’s extended individual existence. They are experienced as being “mine” while not being my current me; they are part of my distinctive lineage. For the purposes of this study, therefore, I suggest that we classify past incarnation experiences on the personal side of the ledger, in the sense of the “extended personal.” The kind of perinatal experiences that I am con-

cerned to understand are those that reach beyond one's individual karmic history, such as those summarized by Grof in the following passage:

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)

The question I am pressing in this study is this: What is the therapeutic value of undergoing such experiences? If a person is caught up in this kind of collective suffering through some form of emotional or physical resonance with the birth experience, what therapeutic function does it have? Where is its therapeutic effect focused and to what end? If we can answer this question, we might in turn gain additional insight into the possible therapeutic efficacy of frightening NDEs.

To anticipate somewhat, I will suggest below that in order to answer these questions we must look beyond the individual subject who is having these experiences to the collective group that he or she is part of. We must enlarge our definition of the patient to include the entire human species. We are assisted in making this conceptual jump by drawing upon Rupert Sheldrake's concept of morphic fields, which in this context can be seen as a refinement of Carl Jung's notion of the collective unconscious.

By way of contrast, Grof always discusses the therapeutic impact of the death-rebirth experience solely in terms of the individual patient. He consistently focuses our attention on the psychospiritual transformation of the individual undergoing the experience, and in a few instances on the transformation of the subject's karmic antagonist (1985, 1988). In *LSD Psychotherapy* (1980), for example, Grof writes:

Activation of the destructive and self-destructive potential *in the individual* [italics added] is one of the most important aspects of the death-rebirth struggle. Scenes of unbridled aggression and mass destruction, as well as sadomasochistic orgies, are standard components of the perinatal unfolding. In this context, enormous amounts of destructive energy are mobilized and discharged: the result is a dramatic reduction of aggressive feelings and tendencies. (p. 281)

Later, in *Beyond the Brain* (1985), when he is summarizing the spiritual repercussions of experiential psychotherapy, the entire discussion revolves around the individual with no mention of the possibility that larger fields encompassing the individual might be affected. Similarly, in *The Adventure of Self-Discovery* (1988), Grof states that experiencing the death-rebirth sequence and reconnecting with the intrinsic spiritual dimension of the psyche is "conducive to profound changes in the philosophical and spiritual belief system, basic hierarchy of values, and general life strategy" [of the individual] (p. 9).

This focus on the spiritual evolution of the individual is another indication of Grof's tilt toward the personal. Granted, the evolution he is describing was an evolution in which the individual transcends his or her personal identity, but this is precisely what creates the ambiguity in Grof's presentation. The death-rebirth sequence culminates in the discovery that one is, at deeper levels, much more than the body/mind self, yet Grof's discussion of the impact of this discovery consistently focuses our attention on the individual subject.

Having outlined some questions left unaddressed in Grof's account, let me turn to attempt some answers. In doing so I want to emphasize that I see this project not as subtracting anything from Grof's analysis but as extending it by making it more consistent with itself.

Rethinking the Perinatal

It is increasingly common today for transpersonally informed writers to speak almost matter-of-factly of three "levels" of consciousness: the personal, perinatal, and transpersonal. While Grof himself has standardized these categories, he also makes it clear that the perinatal does not have the same status as the other two levels, for the simple reason that it does not endure. Perinatal symptomatology eventually consumes itself in experientially oriented psychotherapies and disappears. Over the course of extended therapy, subjects eventually cease to experience perinatal complications, as the transition to transpersonal states of awareness becomes less problematic. While it is operationally active, the perinatal domain appears as an intersection of personal and transpersonal levels, possessing characteristics of each.

As a heuristic device, therefore, let us model consciousness in terms of only two levels, the personal and transpersonal, with the

overlap being designated the perinatal. This is consistent with Grof's overall description and represents only a difference of emphasis. In this model, the term "perinatal" identifies not a distinct "level" but merely a region of interpenetration of two more fundamental modes of awareness. We might think of it as a standing wave that exists between the personal and transpersonal realms. It is a middle zone that functions partly as a bridge and partly as a buffer between two worlds. Awareness functions differently on either side of this zone, which must mediate and integrate these differences.

The advantage of shifting to this simpler model is primarily a gain in conceptual clarity. It emphasizes the fact that the perinatal stands "midway" between the personal and transpersonal levels and participates completely in both. That is to say, it is completely balanced in its makeup, fully partaking of both levels and performing discrete but integrated functions in each. The personal is not more fundamental to it than the transpersonal. When therapy progresses to this point, one's inner work is not necessarily centered on the birth trauma, though under certain conditions it may be. (I will return to this point later.) It is not a domain that makes primary sense in personal categories and less sense in transpersonal categories. Rather, it is an operational mode of consciousness in which the personal and transpersonal blend, sharing organizational patterns and structures. It is a mode in which the roots of individual consciousness intertwine with the forest floor of collective consciousness, where the ending of one and the beginning of the other fade until they disappear. Indeed, Grof's data on the perinatal indicated that the duality of "self" and "surround" is dissolved at the perinatal level and replaced by a holographic dance, in which self and surround move in rhythmic harmony, blending at deeper and deeper levels until they come to express a single design. During the perinatal phase of inner exploration, work may begin at the personal level, that is, the birth trauma, but it will always end at the collective, because the death-rebirth process consumes the categories of the personal and opens one to a larger surround as one's deeper reality.

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 picture. From the personal perspective, the perinatal appears to be the basement of the personal unconscious, in which are kept the undigested fragments of those experiences which have most seriously threatened our physical and psychological integrity. It is the repository of the most serious challenges to our exist-

ence. Small wonder, therefore, that fetal experiences would figure so largely 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. From this side the perinatal domain looks like the 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 and a separate species, isolated from the surrounding tapestry of existence. As such it represents the supreme philosophical ignorance and psychospiritual disease. The perinatal level represents the insanity of 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 self-imposed prison of autonomous existence by dismantling that existence, to deliver 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.

If we want to unravel the logic of the appearance of collective suffering in perinatal contexts, I suggest that we begin by looking upon life the way it appears from the transpersonal perspective. Transpersonal experiences reveal connections that are hidden to the material world of discrete body/minds. For the sake of economy, let us review just two such experiences. The first appeared in *The Adventure of Self-Discovery* (Grof, 1988) and came from a high-dose LSD session.

What followed was a tremendous expansion of consciousness. I was out in interstellar space witnessing galaxies upon galaxies being created right in front of my eyes. I felt that I was moving faster than the speed of light. There were galaxies passing by me one after the other. I was approaching a central explosion of energy from which everything in the universe seemed to originate. It was the very Source of all that was created. As I moved closer and closer to this area, I felt the incandescent heat emanating from it. It was a gigantic furnace, the furnace of the universe.

The sensation of heat was growing to unbelievable proportions, as was the intensity of the light. I recognized that the burning I was experiencing was the burning of the Purifying Fire. As I moved closer, I sensed that my identity was shifting from being the manifestation of this Energy to being the Energy itself. It seemed that I momentarily entered the very core of this Universal Furnace of cosmic creation. The experience was ecstatic and filled me with a sense of Infinite power.

I suddenly understood the principle underlying the organization of the cosmos. It was the Universal Consciousness playing out an endless series of dramas in a way we can see represented on the theater stage or in the movies. In this drama it plays a game of losing itself for the purpose of finding itself again. This Universal Consciousness would plunge into separation, rejection, pain, evil, agony, and darkness to experience the infinite joy of rediscovering its original pristine, safe, and blissful state. Its true identity is indivisible oneness, beyond negativity and dualities of any kind. To make the journey, it had to create the illusion of space, matter, and time and, together with it, the categories of evil, darkness, pain and destruction. (pp. 143-144)

The second account was quite similar to the first but with a different emphasis. It also came from a high-dose LSD session.

The experience then changed into an extremely powerful and moving experience of the Cosmic Tree. The energy became a massive tree of radiant energy suspended in space. Incredibly large, it was comprised entirely of light. The core of the tree was lost to the brilliant display, but limbs and leaves were visible around its edges. I experienced myself as one of its leaves. The lives of my family and close friends were leaves clustered around me on a small branch. All of our distinguishing characteristics, what made us the individuals we were, appeared from this perspective to be quite minor, almost arbitrary variations of this fundamental energy.

I was taken around the tree and shown how easy it was to move from one person's experience to another, and indeed it was ridiculously easy. Different lives around the globe were simply different experiences the tree was having. Choice governed all experience. Different beings who were all part of Being Itself had simply chosen these manifold experiences.

At this point I was the tree. Not that I was having the full range of its experience, but I knew myself to be this single, encompassing Consciousness. I knew that Its identity was my true identity. Though I had taken monism to heart years before, I was now actually experiencing the seamless flow of consciousness into crystallizations of embodiment. I was experiencing how consciousness manifests itself in separate forms while remaining unified. "So that's how it works," I said to myself. I knew that fundamentally there was only One Consciousness in the universe. From this perspective

my individual identity and everyone else's appeared temporary and almost trivial. To experience my true Identity filled me with a profound sense of numinous encounter. (Grof and Bennett, 1992, pp. 165-166)

Readers of this journal will recognize the themes of interpenetration and inclusion that show up so consistently in deep NDEs. The world experienced here is not the world of discrete objects that we know in our ordinary, sensory mode of consciousness, but a deeper level of reality glimpsed through an extreme nonordinary state. Physical boundaries that appear so firm in the sensory mode appear exceptionally porous and even nonexistent in this state. The distinctions between self and other, between individual and species, between species and galaxy, and between galaxy and cosmos appear to hold only within specific limits. Beneath these boundaries runs a web that draws together the physical forms of life into configurations that escape physical sight. As Grof has repeatedly demonstrated in his books and as hundreds of thousands of NDErs have experienced for themselves, one can actually experience these subtle configurations. One can experience the Oneness underlying the physical world and learn first-hand that the truth of participatory interconnectedness subsumes the more relative truth of discreteness. Let us now return to examine perinatal experience within the context of these observations.

In perinatal experience one experiences personal anguish, of both a psychodynamic and fetal sort, intertwined with collective anguish. Sometimes this collective anguish focuses on various groups within human history, while at other times it embraces the human species as a whole, the planet, and even the galaxy. Whatever form it takes, it is always experienced as an expansion of identity. If not in the beginning, it always moves in this direction with repetition. That is, perinatal pain may initially be experienced as someone else's pain, as lying "out there" while I am "in here" experiencing it. Eventually, however, this defense breaks down as the boundary between "in here" and "out there" dissolves and the pain becomes completely appropriated. At this point it is not a personal "I" experiencing, for example, the anguish of thousands of soldiers who have died on the battlefields of history, but something larger than personal consciousness.

It is important to grasp the significance of not only the extension of consciousness that has taken place but the coherence of this extension with one's ordinary self-awareness. One's awareness can open to previously unbelievable limits, but this enlargement always begins

with and is coherent with one's awareness as an individual human being. Repeated experience of the perinatal domain gives one access to a mode of consciousness in which the boundaries of one's body/mind identity are systematically enlarged to encompass larger and larger aspects of human and planetary history. For a time I actually am these thousands of soldiers. Their experience is my experience. I am millions of persons dying of starvation and neglect. I am a planet convulsing in volcanic explosion.

The conclusion that seems to follow from these observations is this: Therapy heals the patient present. If the "patient" in these intense states of awareness has expanded beyond the individual person, we must speculate that the healing realized through these exercises also reaches beyond the individual person. If the awareness experiencing these ordeals is genuinely beyond the personal level, as many subjects have testified, then perhaps the healing that is taking place is also focused beyond the personal level. The patient at this point might no longer be just the individual subject but something larger.

Here we have a riddle to solve. A therapeutic regimen that was initiated by an individual person presumably for his or her individual benefit begins to move beyond the life experience of that one person (even his or her extended karmic life) and to engage the pain of the species. It does so repeatedly and in a systematic fashion, activating collective forms of anguish of massive proportions. The fact that we are accustomed to thinking of psychotherapy primarily in terms of the individual, combined with the fact that these therapies do indeed benefit the individual enormously, have conspired to blind us to the possibility that these experiences might also have a therapeutic impact on systems that transcend the individual. Furthermore, it is not immediately obvious who or what this enlarged "patient" might be. If the therapeutic impact of these experiences reaches beyond the individual, to what does it reach? How should we conceptualize this "something larger" that seems so deeply involved in our healing process?

This is where Rupert Sheldrake's theory of formative causation and morphic fields might help us. Sheldrake's presentation is subtle and complex, and I shall restrict myself, with obvious oversimplification, to highlighting the implications of his theory for our immediate problem.

Sheldrake's Concept of Morphic Fields

Sheldrake uses the term "morphic fields" as a general category that includes several different types of fields, including morphogenetic fields, behavioral fields, social and cultural fields, and mental fields. Here I am primarily concerned with the field that Sheldrake calls the "group mind" (Sheldrake, 1989, pp. 247-248).

Sheldrake has argued in his several books (1981, 1989, 1991) that the individual members of every species are networked through an encompassing species-mind that constitutes the dynamic blueprint of that species. Sheldrake's innovation has been to suggest not only that this field contains the blueprint of the species's physical form and behavioral tendencies, but that it collects and incorporates into itself the new experiences of its individual members, constantly synthesizing at a central level the diverse experiences of its physically discrete parts. Thus, morphic fields can be thought of as mediating between the parts and the whole of a species, and also between the past and the future of a species. They are seen as extending the past into the present while simultaneously collecting experiences from the present that allow innovations in the future. In contrast to Carl Jung's earlier concept of the collective unconscious, Sheldrake insists that his theory is empirically testable because we can in principle test the rate at which a new skill is acquired by a species. The jury will be out on this one for some time, but early reports of attempts to test his innovative hypothesis are encouraging (Sheldrake, 1989).

Sheldrake suggests that between the individual and the morphic field of the species, numerous intermediate fields exist that correspond to various subgroupings that the individual is part of, such as family, community, nation, race, and culture. The species-field is in turn nested in a series of larger fields that encompass, for example, the planet, the solar system, the galaxy, and so on. Like Gregory Bateson (1972, 1979), Sheldrake puts forth a vision of fields nested within fields nested within fields, with lines of communication running from the largest to the smallest and back again.

Sheldrake's theory suggests that the mental processes we see operating within an individual human being might be paralleled by similar processes operating in the species-mind, making allowances for the enormous differences involved. Thus, just as we remember in a coherent fashion the experiences of our individual body/mind, the species-mind would remember its vast experiences. Just as the

integration and management of our individual experiences reflects intelligence and choice, the species-mind might possess the same capacities on a higher order. Similarly, the larger system of which the human species is a part might also possess these capacities, and so on. We soon lose track of the progression, but we do not need to know the map of the entire terrain in order to unravel the logic of transpersonal perinatal experiences, which is our task here.

Morphic Fields and Perinatal Experience

It is striking how well Sheldrake's hypothesis of morphic fields meshes with Grof's experiential data. If we combine their perspectives, new possibilities emerge for understanding the emergence of transpersonal suffering in the context of personal inner work. Very simply put, it would appear that something larger than the individual, yet something that the individual is part of, takes advantage of the opportunity provided it by the individual to heal itself. Following Sheldrake, I suggest that this "something larger" might be the species-mind, a consciousness that collects, retains, and integrates the experiences of its many members. This hypothesis derives from a phenomenological analysis of perinatal experience and remains speculative until such time as Sheldrake's theory is empirically confirmed.

If we assume for the moment that the dynamics of this species-mind do parallel the dynamics of the personal psyche at least to some degree, we can speculate that just as problematic experiences can collect and block the healthy functioning of the individual, similar blockages might also occur at the collective level. This suggests that the unresolved human anguish of history might still be active in the memory of the species-mind, burdening its life just as our individual unresolved anguish burdens ours. Continuing the parallel, if conscious engagement of previously unresolved pain brings therapeutic release at the personal level, the same might also occur at the species-level. Normally we would expect that such an engagement and release would take the form of mass social movements or cultural shifts in which large numbers of persons in some way or another confront and absorb some painful legacy from their collective past. Within the context of intense experiential psychotherapy, however, a new possibility seems to be emerging.

As we follow the roots of our pain in LSD-assisted psychotherapy, we discover that our individual suffering is embedded in a historical web of suffering. The life of the individual appears to crystalize trends that reach beyond the individual, both socially and historically. As our inner life unfolds in the psychedelic arena, we spontaneously find ourselves being opened beyond our individual existence to encompass various aspects of a larger surround, and this surround is, most immediately, the historical experience of our species. Furthermore, the experience is not one of becoming something other than what we are, but rather of reaching into deeper levels of what we already are. We do not take on the species-mind, but rather open to that part of our being where we already are the species-mind. And when this happens, we suffer.

Some suffer more than others, but all suffer. The extreme nature of this suffering can be explained partially in terms of the principle of summation, reflecting the insight that the psyche stores experience in experiential aggregates (COEX systems) whose total energy is the sum of all its parts. If we include in these complex amalgams trauma from previous incarnations, we significantly expand the theoretical explanation of the extreme levels of anguish that can be involved. However, I believe that the principle of summation by itself is insufficient to explain the full scope of perinatal anguish. There are two reasons for drawing this conclusion. First, the sheer quantity of pain can exceed anything that could reasonably be explained in terms of even a long succession of incarnations. Even more telling, however, is the peculiar quality of the suffering. This pain is inherently collective. Its organizational patterns are the patterns of a species, not an individual. Its sweep is the sweep of whole groups of people arching against the backdrop of millennia. As Grof has demonstrated, there are somatic and emotional parallels between this pain and the personal pain one is simultaneously experiencing. Going beyond Grof, however, we should theorize that there is at least a two-tiered structure of healing operating: one at the level of the individual, and a second at the level of the species.

At this point I want to acknowledge what may be a discrepancy between Sheldrake's concept of morphic resonance and my use of that concept. The notion that an individual can mediate cathartic release at the species level suggests the transfer of some form of mental or psychic energy, understanding that the term "energy" is being used somewhat metaphorically in this context. By contrast, Sheldrake holds that morphic resonance is unlike other forms of resonance, such

as acoustic and electro-magnetic resonance, in that it does not involve a transfer of energy from one system to another, but rather a "nonenergetic transfer of information" (1989, p. 108). At this point it is not clear to me whether this discrepancy can be removed by semantic clarification or whether we should propose that at least some forms of morphic resonance involve an energetic transfer of information.

These two tiers of healing, at the individual and species level, are often so deeply intertwined in perinatal experience that it is difficult to distinguish them. However, in *Realms of the Human Unconscious* (1975), Grof presented an account of ego-death in which the individual and collective aspects of the process were unusually well differentiated. The term "ego-death" actually applies more accurately to the personal tier than the transpersonal tier. Suitable terminology for the comparable collective transition is as yet lacking and would have to reflect the varied forms it can take. This account allows us to mark both the parallels and the differences between the two tiers.

. . . [S]uddenly my wild symphony took over. It was as if I were first at the top of a roller coaster gradually being drawn over the precipice, losing control, and being quite unable to arrest the downward plunge that I could see was ahead of me. One analogy I thought of was that this was like swallowing a keg of dynamite with the fuse already lit. The fuse was inaccessible, the dynamite was going to explode, and there was nothing I could do about it. The last thing I can remember hearing before my roller coaster began going down was music that sounded as though it came from a million earphones. My head was enormous at this time, and I had a thousand ears, each one with a different headset on, each earphone bringing in different music. This was the greatest confusion I have ever felt in my life. I was aware of being on the couch; I was dying right there and there was nothing I could do about it. Every time I would try to stop it, I became panicky and terror-ridden. The only thing was to go toward it. The words "trust and obey," "trust and obey" came through to me and in what seemed like a flash, I was no longer lying on the couch and did not have my present identity. Several scenes began to take place; it seemed as though they happened all at once, but let me string them out to try to make some sense of them.

The first scene was plunging down into a swamp filled with hideous creatures. These creatures were moving toward me, but they were unable to reach me. All of a sudden the swamp was transformed into a canal in Venice just under the Bridge of Sighs. My family, my wife, and my children were standing on the bridge looking down at me in this swamp. There was no expression on their faces; they were simply standing there looking at me.

The best way of describing this roller coaster and this entrance into the loss of control would be to compare it to walking on a slippery, very slippery surface. There would be surfaces all over the place and finally all of them would become slippery and there would be nothing left to hold on to. One was slipping, slipping and going further and further down into oblivion. The scene that finally completed my death was a very horrible scene in a square of a medieval town. The square was surrounded by Gothic cathedral facades and from the statue niches in these facades and from the gargoyle downspouts in the eaves animals, persons, animal-human combinations, devils, spirits—all the figures that one observes in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch—came down from the cathedrals into the square and moved in on me. While the animals, the humans, the demons pressed in upon me in the square before these Gothic cathedrals, I began to experience intense agony and pain, panic, terror, and horror. There was a line of pressure between the temples of my head, and I was dying. I was absolutely certain of this—I was dying, and I died. My death was completed when the pressures overwhelmed me, and I was expelled into another world.

At this point in the narrative, a reader familiar with Grof's work might justifiably expect the next paragraph to describe a scene of spiritual rebirth, for this man has undergone a profound ego-death experience. Aspects of fetal experience echo through his account: the enlarged head, confusion and loss of control, the downward plunge, a slippery, slimy environment, a Venetian "canal" known for its polluted waters, and pressure across the temples. There is nothing left to break down at the personal level; his death appears complete. Nevertheless, he does not make the transition to rebirth yet. He continues:

It turned out that this outer world was to be a continuation of deaths at a very different level, however. Now the panic, the terror were all gone; all that was left was the anguish and the pain as I participated in the death of all men. I began to experience the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. I was Christ, but I was also everyone as Christ and all men died as we made our way in the dirgelike procession toward Golgotha. At this time in my experience there was no longer any confusion; the visions were perfectly clear. The pain was intense, and the sorrow was just, just agonizing. It was at this point that a blood tear from the face of God began to flow. I did not see the face of God, but his tear began to flow, and it began to flow out over the world as God himself participated in the death of all men and in the suffering of all men. The sorrow of this moment is still so intense that it is difficult for me to speak of it. We moved toward Golgotha, and there in agony greater than any I have ever experienced, I was crucified with Christ and all men on the cross. I was Christ, and I was crucified, and I died.

This second death is markedly different from the first. The confusion and panic have vanished, his experiential field is clear, and the agony has intensified as he moves to a collective level in which he becomes the entire human race. Religious imagery consummates this expanded identity as he experiences a death that touches all humanity and seems to involve even God. I think we should take this man at his word and honor the distinctions he has so carefully drawn. This second death is not a mere recasting of ego-death against a larger background, but a new movement in the death-rebirth symphony. Something larger is dying at this level, something that seems to involve and affect the entire species. The rebirth that follows continues in this collective vein:

When all men died on the cross, there began the most heavenly music I have ever heard in my entire life: it was incredibly beautiful. It was the voice of angels singing, and we began slowly to rise. This was again almost like birth; the death on the cross happened, and there was a swishing sound as the wind rushed from the cross into another world. The gradual rising of all men began to take place. These were great processions in enormous cathedrals — candles and light and gold and incense, all moving up. I had no sense of my personal existence at this time. I was in all the processions, and all the processions were in me; I was every man and every man began to rise. The awe and splendor of this rising was almost beyond description. We were rising toward light, higher and higher, through majestic white marble pillars. We left behind the blues, the greens, the reds, and the purples, the gold of the cathedrals, and the royal garbs of some of the people. We rose into whiteness; the columns we were rising between were white and pure. The music was soaring, everyone was singing, and then there occurred a vision.

This vision has an entirely different feeling about it from anything else I experienced in the whole LSD session. It still feels like a vision—as if a vision were actually given to me—it is so real. The resurrection garment of our Lord touched me. Yet you have to understand: it did not touch me; it touched all men and yet in touching all men it touched me. When it touched, several things happened at once, as they did many times during this experience. We all became very small—as small as a cell, as small as an atom. We all became very humble and bowed down. I was filled with peace and feelings of joy and love; I loved God completely. While this was happening, the touch of the garment was like a high voltage wire. Everything exploded, and it exploded us into the highest place there is—the place of absolute light. It was silent; there was no music; it was pure light. It was like being at the very center of the energy source. It was like being in God—not just in God's presence, but in God and participating in God. (Grof, 1975, pp. 145-148)

This powerful visionary experience allows us to push our analysis one step further. As already noted, if therapy is continued long enough and at sufficiently deep levels, perinatal suffering eventually ends. On a personal model of the psyche, this makes sense because we assume that one's inner distress is ultimately finite and therefore exhaustible. On the model we are using here, however, it is not this simple. Given the hypothesis of morphic field involvement, we must try to explain the fact that the suffering ends for an individual even though there is obviously more suffering in the species-mind waiting for release. If the individual and the species are so intimately interwoven in their quest for wholeness, how is it that they become separated?

The key to solving this problem is to postulate that the therapeutic value of the individual to the species-mind actually takes two forms, not just one as suggested thus far. The first is the cathartic release of negative experiences. The second is the direct infusion of positive experiences into collective awareness. If it is the case that experiencing the collective suffering of the species in some way mediates experience for the species, by the same logic it would follow that positive transpersonal experiences also directly benefit the species as a whole.

The individual's initial therapeutic contribution to the species-mind occurs while he or she is clearing problematic experiences from the personal psyche. The engagement of personal distress, including fetal distress, in these augmented states of consciousness appears to create a bridge to transpersonal levels through some mechanism of morphic resonance that precipitates therapeutic release at these levels. When a person has exhausted his or her individual pain, however, there is nothing within the individual that allows this resonance with the pain in the surrounding species-mind to be established. At this point the individual does not detach him- or herself from the species, as if that were possible, but rather the therapeutic role for the species shifts from that of cathartic release to the cultivation of positive transpersonal experiences, such as the spiritual vision just quoted.

A careful examination of the above vision supports this line of thought. The subject was clearly struggling to articulate a subtle but important aspect of his experience when he explains, "The resurrection garment of our Lord touched me. Yet you have to understand: it did not touch me; it touched all men." His deeply felt sense of expanded participation causes him to shift spontaneously back and forth between "we" and "I." His narrative is completely in accord with the theory of morphic fields. In this state of expanded awareness, he is *both* himself and all humanity, and thus through him all hu-

manity participates in the uplifting transformation he describes so eloquently.

To this example we can add the observation that many transpersonal experiences in advanced LSD sessions seem clearly to have an educative function. This becomes evident when a particular insight or experience is developed in stages across an extended series of sessions. Each session seems to begin where the last session ended, and the themes repeat themselves until they have been unfolded and assimilated. I suggest that we underestimate the purpose and scope of this instruction if we do not recognize that it is aimed not just at the individual but in some way at the entire species or at some subset of the species. Something appears to be using these privileged states of awareness to gain leverage on the entire species, not just one person.

Summary

To sum up the hypothesis put forward here, I propose that the perinatal dimension of consciousness is as inherently transpersonal as it is personal, that its collective aspects are not secondary to its fetal aspects but rather just as essential. Accordingly, I further propose that the therapeutic benefit of bringing into consciousness the painful collective experiences that regularly surface during the perinatal stage of LSD psychotherapy extends beyond the individual to the human species as a whole. The interpenetration of the consciousness of the individual and the species surfaces in experientially oriented sessions not as an exception to the rule but as a dramatic manifestation of the rule of morphic fields. These heightened states of awareness do not make possible what is otherwise impossible, but rather amplify and make obvious a connection that is usually so subtle as to escape detection. While having jarring implications for our conventional understanding of human identity, this interpretation of perinatal experience is surprisingly consistent with themes emerging in quantum theory (Bohm, 1980).

Possible Explanations for Grof's Tilt Toward the Personal

At this point, we might ask this question: Why would Grof, who has such a deep grasp of transpersonal dynamics, have produced a

description of perinatal dynamics so tilted in the direction of personal psychology? I can think of two possible reasons.

The first and, I think, more important reason has to do with the historical context in which Grof began to publish. Grof worked out the fundamental outline of his paradigm during his 10 years at the Psychiatric Research Institute of Prague (1956-65) and refined them during his six years at Spring Grove Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland (1967-73). Clinical psychiatry was dominated in those years by Freudian thinking with few theoreticians reaching beyond an eclectic synthesis of psychodynamic theory to map the personal unconscious. If Grof was to find any audience among his peers, he would have had to cast his discoveries in categories they could understand, even while inviting them to transcend those categories. Such an approach would have led to emphasizing the fetal aspects of perinatal experience, as a logical extension of psychodynamic theory, over the transpersonal aspects. Similarly, it would have continued the traditional focus on the individual as the only beneficiary of this augmented form of therapy.

In a personal communication (October 16, 1991), Grof has stated that his presentation of perinatal dynamics was primarily influenced by these strategic considerations, and I see no reason to doubt this. There may, however, have been a second, subtler contributing factor, a factor that is relevant to our proposal to understand frightening NDEs as essentially perinatal experience.

The clinical protocol at the Psychiatric Institute of Prague was "psycholytic" therapy, calling for a long series of relatively low dose sessions, using from 75 to 300 micrograms of LSD. In this form of therapy, the unconscious was stripped layer by layer, peeling away the COEX systems and perinatal matrices in smaller increments. While the deep unconscious functions holographically, making it possible for any one session to contain material from all three levels, consciousness is nevertheless less mobilized in low dose sessions than in high dose sessions. Later, at Spring Grove, the clinical protocol was "psychedelic" or high dose therapy, using from 300 to 1500 micrograms, but treatment was restricted to a maximum of three sessions. The goal of these few sessions was to facilitate a deep mystical experience, not to work through conflicts rooted in the psychodynamic and perinatal levels. For a fuller description of the differences between psycholytic and psychedelic therapy, see Grof, 1980; for more on the Spring Grove program, see Grof, 1975; and Grof and Halifax, 1977.

The question of dose is significant here for the following reason. A close reading of Grof's material and a careful examination of my own experience lead me to hypothesize that a psycholytic approach to therapy will tend to emphasize the personal side of the perinatal interface while a psychedelic approach will emphasize its transpersonal dynamics. Generalizations of this sort are risky because many variables influence the content of an individual session, including the personality of the subject, the experience of the therapist, the set and setting of the session, the number of previous sessions, and so on (Grof, 1980). Nevertheless, some observations on the influence of dose are possible.

A low LSD dose results in a less amplified and less catalyzed state of awareness that, in turn, results in, all other things being equal, a weaker resonance between personal and transpersonal levels during the perinatal phase of work. A weaker resonance leads to fewer transpersonal elements being drawn into the therapeutic process. As a result, perinatal sequences would naturally tend to be more centered on reliving one's biological birth. A higher dose of LSD, on the other hand, produces a more highly mobilized state of awareness, encouraging a stronger resonance with the surrounding transpersonal domain. In psychedelic sessions, which are designed not to bypass but to engage and resolve conflict, transpersonal elements would tend to be more prominent in one's perinatal experience and could, over the course of therapy, completely overshadow the fetal aspects of the death-rebirth process.

Grof has stated in several places that it was his work at Prague that provided him with the detailed insights into the many layers of consciousness and their interaction that we see in his paradigm (e.g., Grof, 1975). During the critical years when he was developing his theories, therefore, his primary data base derived from psycholytic therapy. If my conjecture concerning the influence of dose on the slant of perinatal experience is correct, this might have further encouraged a description of perinatal dynamics tilted toward the personal.

Whatever occurred in the past, it seems important at this stage of the discussion to include a consideration of dosage into any comprehensive account of how the perinatal interface manifests itself. My personal observations have been that in a sustained regimen of psychedelic therapy—a treatment option Grof did not discuss at any length in his corpus—transpersonal experiences such as those described in the quote in the opening section of this paper can so domi-

nate perinatal experience as to dwarf the significance of one's biological birth. Fetal aspects may appear as a small vignette projected against thundering transpersonal sequences. Like a solo violin playing against a massive orchestra, the two intertwine, but in this instance the orchestra carries the dominant theme and swallows the violin entirely.

The relevance of this discussion of treatment protocols to a perinatal interpretation of frightening NDEs is this. Phenomenologically, frightening NDEs appear to resemble the perinatal experiences that emerge in higher dose contexts rather than lower dose contexts. In frightening NDEs what usually stand out are the collective, transpersonal perinatal themes, not the personal, fetal themes. The absence of fetal themes does not by itself speak against a perinatal interpretation of frightening NDEs, but rather underscores the fact that a frightening NDE is a highly energized state of consciousness in which the NDErs have moved far beyond the rim of personal consciousness. If they have not been catapulted completely into the light, they have nevertheless been thrown outside the boundaries of the individual psyche, deep into the collective waters of the species mind.

Frightening Near-Death Experiences and Morphic Fields

In my earlier paper (Bache, 1994), I observed that someone who has experienced a frightening NDE is often both terrified and ashamed: terrified to discover that realms of such dread and sorrow actually exist and ashamed to have been denied the ecstatic encounter with the light. I suggested that both reactions might be therapeutically softened by helping the NDEr understand that the frightening NDE is not an alternative NDE but an incomplete NDE. It has less to do with the subject's existential worth than with the as yet hidden variables that determine the strength and intensity of one's NDE.

To these observations we can now add the additional insight that what one encounters in a frightening NDE goes far beyond personal intrapsychic realities. In this experience one is confronting aspects of the collective species mind, glimpsing undigested fragments of our species' historical experience, species COEX systems, if you will. If there is a patient here, it is the species as a whole, not just this one

person. If there is a lesson to be learned from these encounters, it is a lesson that we must learn collectively, not just individually.

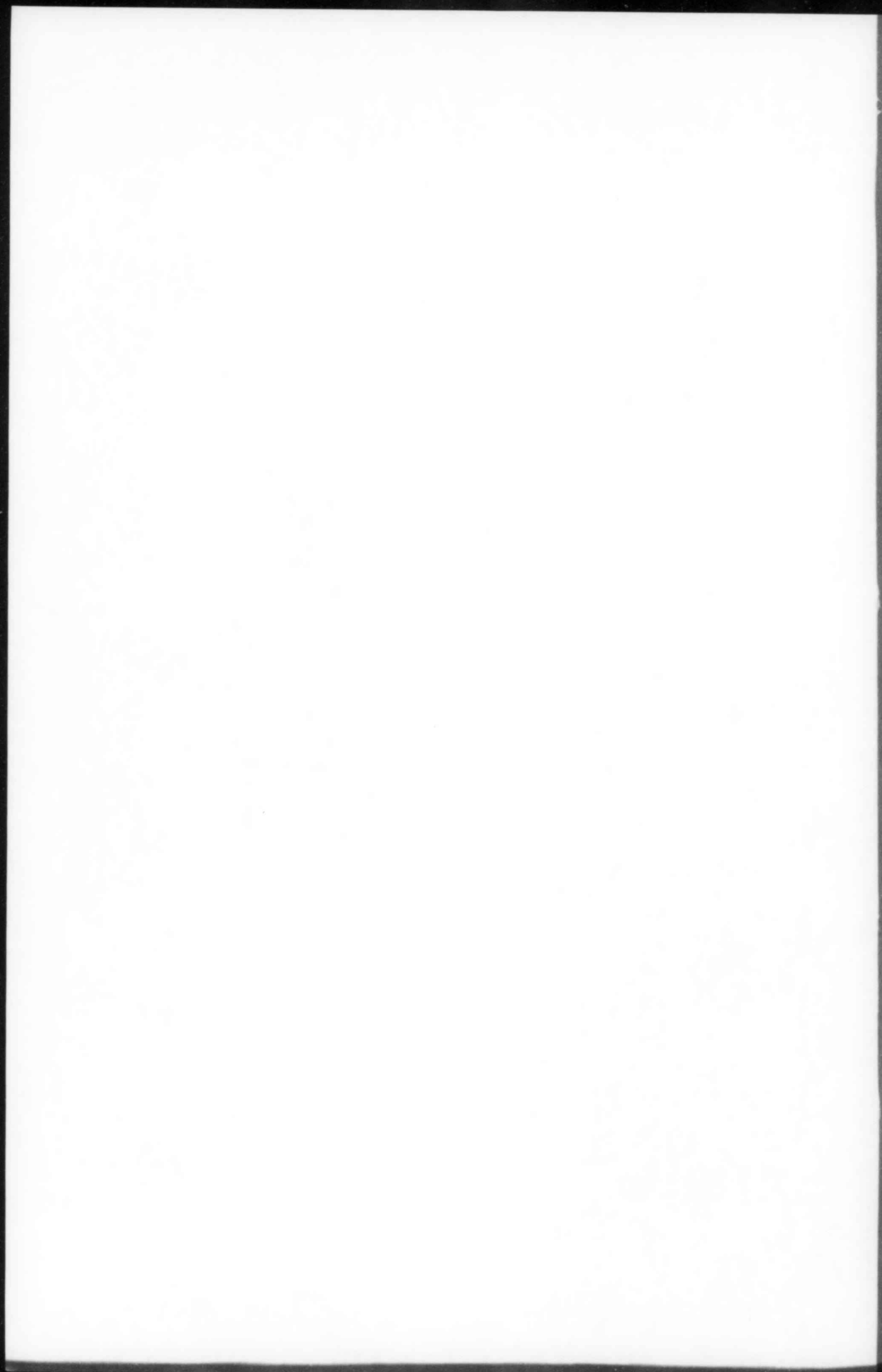
The trauma of these frightening episodes can further be softened by helping the NDEr understand the possible beneficial effect such confrontations may have for the species as a whole, however tentatively and incompletely we grasp the dynamics involved. If recalling repressed trauma helps heal the individual who remembers it, we have some precedent for thinking that when a member of a species brings some aspect of its collective anguish into conscious awareness, it has a healing effect that is distributed through the species as a whole. Just as Kenneth Ring (1984) envisioned the possible enlightening effect of positive near-death experiences on the entire species by means of morphic resonance, so likewise we might suggest to the person who has had a frightening NDE that his or her ordeal might have a small cleansing effect on the entire species mind. Though we may not be able to measure the size of the wave that moves out across waters of the collective unconscious, we have reasons for thinking that a wave has been set in motion.

Lastly, we might remind the NDEr that the notion that an individual can suffer on behalf of others finds many precedents in the world's spiritual traditions. In the West one is reminded of the songs of the "Suffering Servant" in Deutero-Isaiah, which became the theological foundation for the "sacrificial death" interpretation of Jesus' crucifixion. In the East we have the eclipsing of the Theravadan ideal of the *arahant*, who seeks only individual enlightenment, by the Mahayana ideal of the *bodhisattva*, who seeks the enlightenment of all sentient beings. The experience of *nirvana* is said to destroy the illusion of separate existence. If this is true, the everything we do might affect everyone else, including what we do during a frightening NDE.

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Commentary on "Frightening Near-Death Experiences"

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ABSTRACT: Kenneth Ring and Nancy Evans Bush both wrote papers concerning frightening near-death experiences (NDEs) in the Fall 1994 issue of this Journal. The results of my own research are more supportive of Bush's position than they are of Ring's. This paper gives some of the reasons why and illustrates other data accumulated by me concerning frightening NDEs.

The Fall 1994 issue of the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* contained Kenneth Ring's fascinating analysis and hypotheses concerning frightening near-death experiences (NDEs) and commentaries on that article. We are indebted to Ring, Bruce Greyson, and Nancy Evans Bush for establishing a dialogue in this area, and, of course, should also recognize the earlier contributions of Maurice Rawlings (Rawlings, 1978, 1993). My own research is more supportive of Bush's position than it is of Ring's. If, as Ring suggested, "Frightening NDEs merely reflect the fact that hell is actually the experience of an illusory separative ego fighting a phantom battle" (1994, p. 22), then it also should be true that radiantly transcendent NDEs of light and beauty are merely examples of an illusory separative ego confirming a fantasy experience in life continuation. My own research would argue that frightening NDEs are just as valid, or just as invalid, as "expressions of Reality" as are the more euphoric NDEs.

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Results

Experience Patterns

In my article "Near-Death Experience Patterns From Research in the Salt Lake City Region" (Gibson, 1994b), I tabulated the findings of 68 case studies associated with near-death or analogous experiences. Six percent of the cases indicated a feeling of remorse for how the individuals had lived during their earthly life, and 12 percent of the experiences involved fear. In all of these cases the experiences were just as realistic to those who went through them as were those who had more uplifting NDEs.

Howard Storm

Ring mentioned Howard Storm's NDE and suggested that the initial part of his experience, with the evil beings who attacked him, was part of an ego destruction process. It may be true that the ego plays a part in the unfolding NDE drama, as evidenced by Theresa's experience discussed below, but that does not diminish the probability that *all* of the NDE is real. An equally valid interpretation of Storm's NDE would be to accept the evil beings as a part of ultimate reality as much as the celestial creatures that he later met. To quote from another part of Storm's experience that was included in my book, *Journeys Beyond Life* (Gibson, 1994a, pp. 224-225):

Only God knows the truth about every individual. . . . God will ultimately judge every individual. And God will allow people to be dragged into the darkness with like-minded creatures. I have told you, from my personal experience, what goes on in there. I don't know from what I saw any more than that, but it's my suspicion that I only saw the tip of the iceberg.

I deserved to be where I was—I was in the right place at the right time. That was the place for me, and the people I was around were perfect company for me. God allowed me to experience that, and then removed me, because he saw something redeeming in putting me through the experience. It was a way to purge me. People who are not allowed to be pulled into the darkness, because of their loving nature, are attracted upwards, toward the light.

Dee's Terrifying Experience

The terrifying portion of Storm's experience was similar to that of Dee, interviewed by me in 1993. Quoting from portions of Dee's experience (Gibson, 1994a, p. 63):

The next thing I knew was . . . there was something behind me, and I was afraid. I felt this awful presence—and I knew that it was after me. This . . . this thing, this awful, this terrifying thing—I could feel it on me. . . . I was being chased by something that was the personification of evil. And it wanted me. It wanted to destroy me. I was terrified and I was crying, and I remember thinking: *Oh God, help me, help me God.*

Dee found herself back in her body after she uttered the brief prayer. She told me that her life, prior to her experience, had been a living hell because of a controlling and abusive husband. She lived in fear and hate until her experience. Subsequently she left her husband and changed her life.

As Dee told her experience to me and to my wife Carol, we could see her terror as she relived the experience, just as we can see the ecstatic feelings expressed by those who tell and relive their beautiful experiences. Dee was certain that all of the events described by her were real, and she changed her life accordingly.

Elizabeth Marie's Surprising NDE

A truly interesting NDE was reported by Elizabeth Marie (Gibson, 1994a, pp. 126-132). Elizabeth Marie, as a 14-year-old, decided to have a contest with her boyfriend by smoking narcotics. In her subsequent out-of-body experience she was taken to a room filled with other spirits who had lived less-than-desirable lives in this life. She was clothed in a white garment that had black spots on it, the spots representing evil deeds that she had done in life.

She understood that what she had done was wrong, and that her progress in the next world would be stopped if she chose to stay there. Feeling total remorse for what she had done, she chose to come back. The experience changed her life completely. She is now married with a wonderful husband, two lovely children, and she devotes much of her life to attempting to bring recalcitrant souls to Christ.

Evil Presences

Several individuals whom I interviewed felt during their experiences that they were threatened by an evil presence. One that puzzled me at first was the case of Mike, who fell from a cliff at age 9 and had an NDE (Gibson, 1994a, pp. 32-38). Much of his NDE followed the normal pattern, but Mike described an event while he was in the tunnel in which he felt an evil presence and heard a horrible growling noise. I had previously interviewed others who said they heard an animal-like noise, but in this case I could not understand why a little child would be subjected to this kind of evil influence—until he told me the rest of his story.

It turned out that when he was about 6 years old, he and another small friend were fighting. Mike picked up a piece of lumber that had a large nail sticking out of its end, swung it at his friend, hit him in the head, and killed him. He tried unsuccessfully to hide the body. The police later dismissed the case as an accident, but it provided a possible explanation as to why his experience progressed as it did.

Suicides

Five or six individuals described their suicide attempts to me. In some instances they were spectacularly successful. Whether they had an uplifting or frightening experience seemed to depend on what they needed at the time to turn their lives around. In every case they came back knowing that they shouldn't have done it, and vowing to live their lives in a better manner, defined in a religious sense. Karen, who was going through a divorce, described her experience this way (Gibson, 1994a, pp. 81-85):

One night as I was lying in bed, asleep, I was awakened by a male voice saying: "I'm going to get you. Sooner or later, I'm going to get you." The event frightened me and I sat up, wide awake. I told my roommate, and she said it was just a dream, and not to worry about it.

About a week later, everything seemed so hopeless that I took the bottle of tranquilizers. My full intention was to kill me. It seemed the best way to handle my problems, just go to sleep. . . . At the hospital, I found out later, they pumped my stomach and put charcoal in it. They didn't think I was going to make it. My heart had stopped, and they used defibrillator paddles to restart it.

During this period I became aware that I was conscious, but I was enveloped in total darkness. It was pitch black all around, yet there was a feeling of movement. My conscious self assured me that I was in the form of a spiritual body.

A male voice spoke to me, a different voice than the one I heard a week before. This voice said: "You have a choice. You can stay here, or you can go back. If you stay here, your punishment will be just as it is, right now. You will not have a body, you will not be able to see, touch, or have other sensations. You will only have this darkness and your thoughts, for eternity."

Terrified because of the experience, and because of what I had heard, I understood that this would be my private hell. There would be no contact with other life or with the sensations of life, for eternity. Yet I would remain conscious with my thoughts in total blackness.

Frantically scared, I knew immediately that I had made a terrible mistake. Telling the voice that I had made a mistake, I asked to go back, to return to life. The voice said, "All right, you may return."

Cause and Effect Relationships

In each of these cases that I have cited, there was a cause and effect relationship. That is, the individuals who had the frightening NDEs could point to circumstances in their lives that led to the frightening NDE. This was the case in every instance of those I interviewed who had some type of unpleasant experience. I am aware that other researchers have not found this cause and effect relationship, but in all of the cases I studied it was dramatically evident.

The proposition that either rapturous cosmic encounters or horrifying journeys into the unknown can be related to the previous department of the individual undergoing the experience should be a testable hypothesis. In my instance, I was able to ascertain particular cause and effect relationships by encouraging the subjects to discuss other events in their lives that they thought might be of interest. Caution is necessary, of course, to assure that judgments of the interviewer do not intrude on the responses of the subjects.

Another Category of Frightening NDE

Ring mentioned different categories of frightening NDEs, originally described by Greyson and Bush (1992). One he characterized as an "inverted" NDE, in which the fearful aspects later converted to a

more traditional NDE of light; the others he described as "hellish" and "meaningless void" experiences. There is another category that could usefully be considered, which I would characterize as "instructional."

In the instructional type of NDE, the participant is usually led by some "spirit guide" to an otherworldly area where the subject participant can witness hapless spirit beings suffering extreme agony in a hellish type of existence. In these cases the participant is not necessarily exposed to the extreme suffering that he or she witnesses, except to understand the agony of those who are suffering. George Ritchie and Elizabeth Sherrill (1978, pp. 56-67) described several such instances. A few of the individuals whom I interviewed recounted such circumstances. Elane Durham told of seeing

a host of people. Rays from the light were shining over the tops of the heads of the people, but they didn't seem to notice. They appeared to be shuffling around, and I could feel anger and confusion coming from them. It was as if they were all lost, and they were agonizing over the pain that they felt. (Gibson, 1993, p. 65).

Theresa, a portion of whose experience is described below, also falls into this category.

The Paradox of Opposites

Concerning the paradox of opposites, I recently interviewed a young woman, Theresa, who had an extensive NDE as a result of a heart attack. As in Storm's extensive experience, Theresa received instruction from beings of light. A major difference between Storm, who was a college professor at the time of his experience, and Theresa was that Theresa never graduated from high school. I was astonished, therefore, when she responded immediately, with no pauses for thought, to some of my questions in this manner:

Q: Did you see anything during your experience of a negative nature?

A: No, because there is no such thing as negative.

Q: What do you mean?

A: Negative is a concept that we have developed to describe things that work against our preconceived notions. Everything is both—negative and positive—and they both create energy. It

works for you or it doesn't. It works for God or against Him. But they both serve a divine purpose.

Q: Did you see anything that worked against God?

A: Yes. Even that was of a divine nature, though. It enters a person as ego—a driving force of self, to please oneself.

Q: How did you see that?

A: It came in the form of an angered spirit. I couldn't imagine him being so angry, but he was.

Q: What was happening to him, and why was he angry?

A: He was isolated within himself. The energy emanated by him created his own world, almost a separate planet. When I saw him I also heard laughter. It was a hideous type of laughter.

Q: Were there people trying to help him?

A: No. It was as if he had his own world, and it was of his own making.

Q: Do you have any special messages for anyone who might read your story?

A: Yes. I want to talk a little about fear. Fear is a blessing.

Q: How so?

A: Fear is the key to unfolding what is within us. If we didn't have fear there would be nothing to propel us into the next adventure or experience. Without fear we would not be alert to the full measure of the experiences we pass through. Those experiences are vital for our growth. Tears and grief are what carve the opening for us to have joy and love. If we didn't have a cavity carved by fear, pain, and grief, we wouldn't be able to fully appreciate the love and joy that are within our reach. The key to growth in the future is to love ourselves and to extend that love to others. The interconnectedness of all living beings, and the love we feel for all life, are gifts from God. The Lord made it possible for us to love as we should, but we often deny ourselves that privilege. When we grieve, we should know that we are grieving tears of precious love—a love for the connectedness of all humans.

Q: What about injury and illness?

A: That's a difficult question, because I don't like suffering. When I was suffering the most, though, I actually grew closer to those I loved than when I was well. Sometimes trauma and illness occur in order to help those who associate with the one having the trauma. We tend to feel that we come here and live our lives for ourselves—we are very selfish. In my life's review I

understood that my life was lived not just for me, but for others that I interacted with. We are all connected in God's plan. We, and every other living thing, affect everything else. It is time for people to wake up and appreciate, from the inside, who they are. You don't have to belong to a religion to do that. Religion was created as a tool so that God could help you to know yourself. There is a you inside of you, a soul, that is united with God.

Conclusion

Bush made the insightful comment: "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" (1994, p. 51).

I couldn't agree more. The Cains and Abels of the world have ever been thus, and they are, in my opinion, a paradigm of a larger truth, namely, of a dualism that extends into an otherworldly cosmic reality. That reality suggests patterns of interconnectedness between that world and this one, including likely cause and effect relationships.

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Letter to the Editor

Frightening Near-Death Experiences

To the Editor:

In response to the articles on frightening near-death experiences (NDEs) by Kenneth Ring (1994a, 1994b), Christopher Bache (1994), and Nancy Evans Bush (1994) in the Fall 1994 issue of the Journal, please allow us to share an insight developed after reading Anthony Borgia's *Life in the World Unseen* (1993).

This narrative purports to be a description of life after death, communicated by an individual whose demise was not "unscheduled." NDErs apparently "die" before their time and pass into the next world unexpectedly. According to Borgia, when we die at our appointed time, there is always a guide awaiting us, ready to escort us into the next plane of existence, to comfort us, to calm our fears, to decrease our confusion, to answer our questions, and to aid us in this great transition. NDErs, on the other hand, seem to appear in the other life unexpectedly. Because of this, there seems to be some delay in providing an escort. Some NDErs have no recollection of meeting with any kind of escort; this alone might induce panic and terror.

Borgia made three points that might help explain frightening NDEs. First, he stated clearly that evil-doers in this life so degrade their souls that they find themselves in unpleasant circumstances in the next world, because they did nothing to provide for the care of their souls while they were on earth. Therefore, their place of "punishment" is a nightmarish region of their own creation, which they—to quote Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843)—have "forged in life, link by link and yard by yard" by ill treatment of their fellow humans. So it is certainly possible that some NDErs see a preview of what they have prepared for themselves, if they are cruel and evil-minded.

Second, Borgia wrote that these realms of self-inflicted punishment interpenetrate the earthplane. In other words, the sectors of the parallel universe we describe as "the hereafter" that lie closest to us are these darker realms. Therefore, when an NDEr glimpses things just on the other side, what he or she might see right off could be someplace most unpleasant. Some NDErs have said they remember

seeing gray figures in mists, downcast and sorrowful because they could not tear themselves away from the things of this life, whether because of remorse or malevolence, we do not know. This might be a good model to explain what we refer to as "hauntings" and "ghost phenomena." Some people believe these souls are trapped near the earthplane because they refuse to believe that they are, in fact, dead!

Third, the purportedly deceased author of *Life in the World Unseen* described in great detail the first few moments of his transition. He had an urge to sit up, did so, and was quite easily out of his body. An old friend was immediately there by his deathbed, a man named Edwin. Edwin took the newly departed individual "up" to the realm where he would rest for a brief time and dwell as he continued his spiritual progression. As they made the journey, Edwin told the dead man to close his eyes and not open them again until he was told to do so. As they journeyed through these "lower realms" it would have made sense that Edwin would not have wanted his new charge to see what goes on there; it would have been too upsetting and so he saved a tour of the dark places for later, following a period of rest.

We think these insights might possibly help explain the strange reports of negative NDEs, in particular those reported in Maurice Rawlings' (1978) fascinating and pioneering book.

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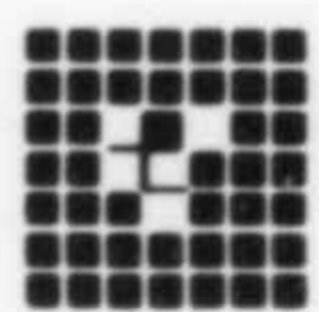
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