THE DARKNESS OF GOD: MY NDE TRIGGERS "NIRVANA"

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SUMMARY. In 1983, I almost died after eating a drug-laced toffee. I woke, and saw that the hospital room was shining. I recalled a near-death experience (NDE) - a blissful, "alive", shining, utter darkness. The experience has continued ever since, and has radically changed my attitude to life and death (but not my lifestyle). I have spent a lifetime studying religions; but only now do I really understand what mystics and saints (ancient and modern) meant by "Nirvana" and "enlightenment". I am committed to scientifically documenting my new "God or cosmic consciousness".

Over the decade since American physician Raymond Moody published "Life After Life" (1), many stories have appeared about the strange experiences of people almost dying in accident or illness. The accounts range from sensational, to the serious scientific studies by surgeon Michael Sabom (2) and psychologist Kenneth Ring (3). I do not want just to add another story. My near-death experience (NDE) in Thailand in November 1983 was less dramatic than many in the literature. I had no clairvoyant perception of my body in the hospital bed; no visions of supernatural beings or deceased relatives; not even of white light or heavenly music. Yet, remarkably, my experience was that it has remained with me ever since: not just as a vivid memory, nor just as a new attitude to life and death - but as a radical change of consciousness which puts me in touch with "eternal life" right now.
NEAR-DEATH
I was poisoned by a would-be thief on a long-distance bus travelling from Surat Thani on the east coast of southern Thailand to the west coast. I now know (and this has been reported in the Australian press) that thieves regularly work Thai buses and trains with drugged sweets for tourists, who have woken up to find belongings stolen. The Thais do not publicise this; and I had discounted the few reports I had heard as talk among hippies who had eaten too many magic mushrooms.

I was not suspicious of the nice man who helped us with our luggage and offered us Cadbury's toffees on a public vehicle in broad daylight. My wife, Ann Faraday, was so put off by the musty bitter taste that she spat hers out. I sucked the toffee out of politeness. When the thief saw that Ann was not eating hers, he hastily left the bus at the next stop – just as I began to feel drowsy. My head dropped onto my chest and I began to drool. Ann grabbed at the sweets must be drugged – but thought she would let me sleep it off. After a while, Ann noticed with alarm that I was blue around the lips and had no detectable pulse. With difficulty, she persuaded the driver to stop the thought I was drunk). She managed to get us a ride back to Surat Thani where the doctors were not hopeful of saving me, although they assumed that my lack of response to tests for pain was due to the drug (they suspected morphine) rather than imminent death. They pilled me with antidotes, oxygen and intravenous drip. I revived about seven hours later.

NDE RECALLED
It was some hours later before I really surfaced. I heard a voice ask if I wanted supper. For some time after, I was solely occupied with getting in touch with where I was. I began to wonder why the shabby hospital room seemed transcendentally beautiful. My first thought was: "Hey, is this why people get hooked on opium or morphine?". But second thoughts told me that after so many hours the drug effect should have worn off (a conclusion later confirmed by leading drug experts I consulted in Australia). What is more, I had taken part in psychedelic drug research in England in the late 1960s, and had some extraordinary experiences, including the transcendental experience of blissful white light under LSD (4). But the experience at Surat Thani was altogether calmer, less direct, and less complete in a sense.

Also, drug effects that persist or return (months later in the case of LSD) are off-on events that do not produce the almost continuous "enlightenment" I now experience.

I began to wonder if I had had some kind of NDE while I was "out". So I tried a technique Ann and I sometimes find useful when we wake up knowing we have had a reemersive dream just before waking, but cannot remember it. I lay on the bed, relaxed, and began to take myself back in imagination, in a series of steps, to the point of awakening. What came flooding back on this occasion was nothing like a remembered dream. It was an experience that in some extraordinary way is still with me.

THE DARKNESS
It was if I had come out of the deepest darkness I had ever known – and somehow it was still there right behind my eyes. One woman told me she could see "a soft, violet blackness", I now know what she meant – except that I want to say more than that. I am inclined to take Jung's belief (5) that alcohol was concerned more with psychological or spiritual changes than chemical ones. One alchemical text states that there is a crucial point in the transformation where the operator "falls into the black sun" and experiences "a palpable light" and an interesting psychological anticipation of "black holes".

Most NDE literature emphasises experiences of light rather than darkness. If darkness is mentioned at all, it is usually a dark valley or tunnel through which the person hurtles towards a bright light or heavenly landscapes. The experience of darkness is rare. But even those who travel beyond the experience of darkness are often afraid of it. One man reported to Moody, however, a more "positive" darkness that "was so deep and impenetrable that I could see nothing and was very frightening. This was the most wonderful, worry-free experience you can imagine". I, too, felt utterly secure in my darkness. I had talked at that time about the experience with a friend, who had asked me what I would do if I came into the same experience again. I said that I would simply live with it.

Mystics confirmed
I am not drawing any theological or metaphysical conclusions when I use the word "God" here. On the contrary, my previous readings in theology and metaphysics never conjured up in my mind anything remotely like my experience. I am simply asserting that, since the experience was supported by some by mystics in all religions suddenly seem to make sense as partial attempts to describe the extraordinary state I found myself in. For instance, Mohamad's statement that he experienced "the night of power", or the assertion by St. John of the Cross that he encountered God as "a dark cloud illuminating the night".

That shining darkness seemed to contain everything that ever was or could be, and all space and all time. Yet it contained nothing at all, because 'thing' implies separate entities, whereas what I experienced was a simple 'beingness' without any kind of separation of one thing from another. The essence of 'aliiveness' prior to any individual living entities. Another paradoxical expression, this time from Eastern mysticism, is the only one that is remotely adequate – the experience of light the Christian mystic Jacob Boehme when he called God 'a suprasensuous abyss'.

Another Moody subject reported 'just floating and twirling through space' and I was so taken up with this void that I just didn't think of anything else'. The idea of a void being interesting would have seemed nonsense to me before, but now it makes total sense. In fact, the state of being described seems to defy all ordinary canons of logic. My deepest response is to Buddha's classic description of Nirvana, which simply piles one contradiction upon another:

"Nirvana, there exists that condition wherein is neither earth nor water nor fire nor air; wherein is neither the sphere of infinite space nor of infinite consciousness nor of nothingness nor of neither-consciousness nor unconsciousness; there is neither this world nor a world beyond nor both together nor moon-and-sun. Thence, monks, I declare there is no coming to birth: thither is no going there is no duration thence is no falling; there is no arising. It is not something fixed it moves not on; it is not based on anything. That indeed is the end of Ill (1).

And even 'the end of Ill' has to be contradicted, too, for if it is to do justice to my experience, for it was in no way merely negative. It was certainly 'a very peaceful blackness', but there was nothing passive or useless about it. It was "an uniectable passeth understanding". Words like "bliss" or "joy" are equally inadequate, for they are far too limited, which is why there are so many religious documents known to mankind, the Katha Upanishad tells us that when its young hero Nachiketa went to the kingdom of death, he discovered a new kind of self, the Universal Self (Brahma), who is "evenfellow Being, joy beyond joy."

ENTERING AND LEAVING NIRVANA
I have no recollection of the transition from ordinary into Nirvanic consciousness. I cannot positively deny having any sensation of leaving my body or passing through a tunnel. I just do not remember anything after feeling drowsy on the bus. In the shining darkness there was no feeling of having gone anywhere; it was more like everywhere being present to me. Yet there was a sense of having ceased to be the ordinary me, which is my reason for thinking that my experience was, like Nachiketa's, a trip into the "kingdom of death" rather than the hyping up of the brain by the drug.

My feeling is of being beyond death (though I do not mean surviving death). The Self which I had become was so much greater than my ordinary self that I had little recollection of, or interest
in, my personal history. Yet I did not lose my past or the people I have known in ordinary life. Although my NDE did not contain a “life review” (like many other NDEs), I still sensed that my whole life was completely present, and could have been reviewed if I had wanted it to be. I had not met my deceased relatives or ‘angels, archangels and the whole company of heaven’. But in that “deep and dazzling darkness” I felt no need.

It is almost impossible to describe how I came back from Nirvana. The very phrase “came back” is wrong, for two reasons. Firstly (as stated earlier): the Nirvanic state did not become just a memory; when I clicked back to it using dream-recall, I found it was still right there with me. Secondly: it is illogical to talk about moving out of a state in which I have ceased to exist. This is not a problem all great religions have wrestled with in their various doctrines of creation. If God is everything, then nothing else exists, and if God is eternal, “when” can time possibly come into being? I used to think of these as abstract metaphysical questions, and so meaningless word-juggling. I feel sure now that those old creation stories were attempts to express precisely my experience.

In the Taittiriya Upanishad it is said that Brahman changed from the pure Unmanifest to the Manifest (Shakti). In the Jewish Cabala, it is said that the god (the Limitless) created a space within itself, so that limited being could also exist (Shakti). To coin my own phrase, for me it was as if the personal “I” bubbled out from that entity of shining dark, without my ceasing to be that shining dark. This must be what Hindu theology is trying to express by the statement that the Atman (the individual self) is identical with Brahman.

THE BLISS OF CREATION

The whole experience was blissful, which is another marked contrast to many NDEs. There was no sense of regret at coming from a heavenly “place” into the narrow world of physical existence. I resonate to those wonderful words attributed to God in the Book of Job: “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” I feel I know exactly why the Bible says that God looked upon the creation and saw that it was good. Before my NDE, the idea of God creating the world always conjured images of a super-protector or builder at work. The “feel” of my creation experience was more of the idea of created things being drawn into existence by the sheer radiance of divine beauty. The bud that was me opened out in response to that black sun (which was also, paradoxically, all-white). I was alaaha and omega — the beginning and end of the creation process.

NIRVANA STILL WITH ME!

The most astonishing thing about my NDE is that it is all still here: both the shining black void, and the experience of myself coming into being out of (yet somehow in response to) that radiant darkness. My whole consciousness (of myself, and of everything else) has changed. I feel as if the back of my head has been sawn off, so that it is no longer 60-year-old John who looks out at the world, but the shining dark infinite void which in some extraordinary way is also “I”. My eyes and other senses perceive a whole world that seems to be coming into existence, fresh-scented, minted by moment by moment. I am constantly up again: whenever I try to describe the experience. In one sense, I feel infinitely far back in sensing the world, yet at the same time I feel the very opposite: it is if my consciousness is no longer inside my head at all, but out there in the things I am experiencing. I often sense that when I perceive, that I am the tree perceiving itself.

I hasten to add that my consciousness is like this on average only about 50% of the time (the proportion varies from week to week). I wish it were there all the time. I constantly drift back into my old way of experiencing myself and the world. At first, in Thailand, I caught myself thinking “Oh God, it’s gone”. But I soon realised that “gone” was the wrong way of putting it. Plotinus wrote that the Supreme is always with us, but we do not always look at it (in the same way in which the strange statement meant). I can — and constantly do — forget that the shining darkness is there. Then, suddenly, I realise that something is wrong and it all comes flooding back — the shining black void, with every moment a new creation! I now know why the Christian mystics insisted that it is we who turn away from God, not God from us.

ADJUSTING TO THE NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

Week after week, as I drifted in and out of “God consciousness”, I suppose this is what Plotinus meant when he said that the Supreme is not “other”; it is we in our so-called normal consciousness who are “other”, estranged from the true ordinariness of reality. Practically, I found that I had no urge to make any drastic changes. I simply accepted that this is the new consciousness did not take away my taste for meat, wine or humour, or increase my desire for sitting in meditation. (I had always enjoyed half-hour spells of meditation without finding the process any big thing. Now, I enjoy meditation more, but it is no different in essence (or pleasure).) I now understand what the modern mystic Da Free John means by “divine ordinariness”, which he illust- trated in his lovely poem (7) by saying that after his final experience of God realisation, he went home with his wife and watched TV! An old Chinese saying is: “before enlightenment, eat wood and draw water; after enlightenment, how wood and draw water”.

Nevertheless, the new consciousness has brought about a subtle yet radical change in my attitude to life in general. This corresponds so closely with what I have called explanations of enlightenment that I use the word without apology. Foremost: I no longer fear dying. This is a well-known result of NDEs, and often goes hand in hand with greater joy of living. But for me it would be false to attribute my changes in attitude to a metaphysical conviction that “death is not the end” or that there is a “world beyond”. My changed feeling about death is simply part of a more general, all-embracing equanimity for which the label of “Buddhist notion of non-attachment” is the practical counterpart of the paradox (already mentioned) that Nirvana consciousness totally complete in itself yet still takes delight in “manifesting”. I no longer have any urgent desire for good things in the way of things that Buddhists would call it “craving”.

The shining dark consciousness is all the happiness I could possibly want.

Although I get more pleasure than before from “good” experiences like sunsets, bird song, great art, pleasant people or delicious food, I also get as much pleasure from things which in my old state I would have called unpleasant: for example, the Sur Thani hospital room, or a very wet day, or a heavy cold. This last discovery — that I could positively enjoy a cold (not merely wallow in the indulgence of a day in bed, but really get a kick from the unusual sensations in my nose and throat) — was a big surprise.

Although I knew from the very first that my fear of death was gone, I had no such assurance about pain. Right from the first night, I speculated that the contrast between the two must be the “coming back” and the feelings of regret reported by so many NDErs, might be because my NDE was caused by a pain-killing drug (most people come back to very painful bodies). Indeed, over the next few weeks I found a headache or travel sickness did dis- tract me from the new consciousness quite powerfully, so that I was forced to wait until it had passed for “enlightenment” to take possession of me again.

“ENLIGHTENMENT” SPREADS

At first I resigned myself to the idea that my enlightenment must be of an inferior kind, since I lacked immunity to suffering (characteristic of the enlightened person in Eastern thought). Then I began to notice changes. The feeling of being “open to the void” at the back of my head had spread, without my noticing, down my spine to the middle of my back. Around that time, I found that the tinnitus hissing in the ears from which I have suffered for
some years, had changed from being a mild annoyance (which I could at best manage to forget at times) to a positively delightful sound which I welcomed as an old friend whenever it forced itself on my attention. I also actually started to enjoy tiredness and the many minor pains that afflict a 60-year-old body: a startling verification of Freud's contention that pleasure and pain are often a matter of how we perceive precisely the same sensation (8). Then came my first post-NDE cold: a hitherto unexpected potential for pleasure. Around that time, I found the feeling of "openness" had spread still further down my back, right into my buttocks: a kind of upside-down version of the Hindu Kundalini flowing up the spine.

CHALLENGING RESEARCH PROJECT
My entry into Nirdvana has not transformed me into "Instant Hero" or "Saint". I still get annoyed when I think people are trying to push me around, and I still keep aspirin in the house in case I get pain I cannot enjoy. Yet, it does seem to have plunged me into an adventure of consciousness wherein I have no idea what the next surprise will be. I would be dizzy if it were not so fascinating. I often feel as if I have been born again into a new life. I am like an infant still learning my way around. My old life is a distant memory: not actually forgotten or blurred, but somehow cut off, so that recalling it requires the same effort as remembering the lines of a play once known by heart but not performed for years. This feeling is a common result of NDEs (9).

My new life seems to be the fulfillment of the old one in ways I had never dreamed of before. This adventure of consciousness gives me a research project: more challenging and exciting than anything that came my way in my earlier career as a scientist. My interest in dreams and the awareness of consciousness since I left physical science seems just a preparation for the work I now have to do in exploring this new state. I find myself sharing with NDEers and mystics of all ages a profound sense of gratitude for this gift. This is perhaps the most important paradox: I have come to understand the mystical sense of the uttering goodness of the universe in no way lessens my desire to contribute to the world. On the contrary, that desire is an integral part of my mystical consciousness, an overflowing of thanks for the sheer joy of being.

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NOTES
(6) The literature always puts such events in the past tense, meaning "once upon a time". The present tense would be better: I now see it as a continuous process.
(10) Survey reported in Vital Signs, Fall 1984. Publisher: International Association for Near Death Studies, Box U-20, University of Connecticut, Storrs CT 06268.
(11) Omega Science Digest, November 1984: 48-51 & 89.

SOCIIOLOGICAL REASONS FOR THE RECENT INTEREST IN NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

ALLAN KELLEHEAR

Near-death experiences (NDEs) have been studied by psychical researchers for nearly a century, and yet in the last 10 years this interest has sky-rocketed (1). Many observers have asked: "What is it about NDEs that attracts such interest?". But the basic features of NDEs have remained fundamentally unaltered since their earliest recognition. It is more appropriate and insightful to ask: "What has happened to our society that has recently made us so responsive and fascinated by the latest round of discussions about NDEs?". This paper tries to answer this question.

Numerous popular and academic works recount the now well-known common features of the NDE: the close brush with death which results in the sensation of travelling down a dark tunnel; out of body experiences; the meeting of a personal bright light and/or deceased relatives; ending with a reluctant return to one's own body. This is the "core" experience, with many respondents experiencing one or more of these central features.

In sociological terms, there have been four major changes in our society which have led up to the recent explosion of interest in the NDE. These are:

(a) Technical and demographic changes underlying our experience with death;
(b) Our present changing view of death and dying;
(c) The changing role of religion;
(d) Our changing relationship with institutions.

These changes are not the only ones our society has recently experienced, but they are the ones that might be seen as more directly relevant to understanding the recent interest in NDEs.

TECHNICAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES
One of the major reasons why the NDE has been receiving more attention in the last decade has been because more people are experiencing it. Improved medical technology and techniques in the area of resuscitation have meant more people are recovering from close brushes with death. A shift from acute to chronic types of disablement associated with increased life expectancy this century has meant that most people who die will be old and most of these will die in institutions (2). The principal institutions are the nursing home and the hospital, which because of the preponderance of medically-trained personnel, increase the possibility of resuscitation.

The historical shift of workers towards white collar occupations this century— from farmer to labourer to clerk— has had a further impact on illness trends. The mass collection of white collar workers in cities and their association with increased migration, over-work, increased drug and alcohol consumption, and sedentary leisure activities has caused the incidence of cardio-vascular diseases to rise dramatically (3). Heart attacks and strokes, vehicular and industrial accidents have become commonplace and widespread, leading to more resuscitation attempts, and more NDEs. Because the NDE is no longer a rare occurrence, it fascinates us because it is more likely to occur to ourselves or to someone we know.

OUR CHANGING VIEWS OF DEATH AND DYING
For 30 years or so before the 1960s, death was a taboo topic (4)— even discussion of death in medical circles was "bad taste". Then, seemingly, all of a sudden, people in the social sciences, and also journalists, began writing about many "taboo" subjects.
Sex, drugs, rock and roll, revolution, astral travel, parapsychology, anti-psychiatry...these and other topics of public and professional discussion. There was a general disenchantment with orthodox institutions and, in particular, with the church. All through the 60s and 70s that reformation would come: de-segregation, the recall of troops from Vietnam, Vatican II and the Christian Ecumenical Movement, and an explosion of literature and institutional reforms regarding sexuality, madness and death. In the late 60s, there had been almost no significant scientific literature dealing with death and dying. By 1976 there were over 750 books, hundreds of journal articles, and over 200 films and audio-visual aids (5). This did not take into account TV interviews with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and other popular scholars and clinicians. Now, the literature continues its dramatic rise and will continue to do so.

Research into NDEs has been part of this general search for knowledge about death—a taboo area mystified and hidden by invisible social institutions such as medicine and religion. Interest in NDE can here be seen as part of the wider and heightened general interest in death and dying observed in the last 20 years.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF RELIGION

There has been a widespread disenchantment with religion this century, although its intellectual roots go much further back. This has not led to less believers but rather to more non-believers (6). The reasons for this are many. Among the notable sociological reasons are:

a) The rise of a large, educated, socially mobile, middle class;

b) The intellectual critiques of Feuerbach, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche;

c) The failure of religious institutions to adapt and remain relevant to the changing social values of their membership;

d) A further failure of religious authorities to credibly reply to social and intellectual critics.

This lead to widespread rejection of traditional simplistic images of God and the afterlife. For those with a more realistic, non-spiritual view of religion, these problems led to a revision in philosophical and theological ideas. In short, the ancient religious world picture simply collapsed for Western religions and from these ruins emerged challenging new ideas of the afterlife (7) and creation (8) and a fresh round of arguments for the existence of God (9).

This tumultuous religious atmosphere and drama of Christianity and the ancient medieval picture of the afterlife, but within conventional present day religious interpretations. Within the self-searching revisionism of contemporary Christianity, NDEs might be integrated into the new theological discussions of God and his relationship with humanity and the cosmos. They might be one of the essential tools for this discussion. The de facto scholarly attitude in contemporary society means that social judgements are cautious and subject to change. Public opinion is more fickle than ever. It also means a better social climate for discussion of any controversial subject whether this be research on NDE or the NDE itself.

Whether positive (the revisionist face of religion) or negative (the rejection and skepticism of religious ideas), the contemporary religious crisis of the West provides, ipso facto, a basis for our continued interest and fascination for NDEs.

OUR CHANGING RELATIONSHIP WITH INSTITUTIONS

The social attitude now on the ascendant is the "self-solve, self-help" view of the world. This is part of what social forecasters have called the "post-industrial information society" where there is a growing feeling of optimism in all sectors of our society that we, rather than just institutions, know what is best for us. Just as in medicine, the trend towards self-reliance in service, goods and information include: 8000 speciality magazines (in the USA alone); birth control advice; marriage kits; self-help for all; the self-sufficiency movement; alternative and preventive medicine; food and welfare co-operatives; community crime watch; and consumer protection societies. Our former trust in institutional help and advice has become conditional.

The new cynicism towards authority which stems from the public awareness of competing views and factions within all institutions means that people will now accept such judgements cautiously. Medical, scientific and religious authorities have not been able to dismiss the NDE so easily. The only sure method of obtaining public support or rejection for any idea, including the NDE, is to provide copious amounts of evidence and to instigate and debate our conclusions. The de facto scholarly attitude in contemporary society means that social judgements are cautious and subject to change. Public opinion is more fickle than ever. It also means a better social climate for discussion of any controversial subject whether this be research on NDE or the NDE itself.

CONCLUSION

To take a sociological view of recent developments and increase in NDE is not to explain that interest. Rather, it seeks to explain the current social conditions under which such interest might proliferate (or wither). Increased public interest in NDEs should not be explained away as simply another rise in the human desire for immortality, like the desire for gods. We cannot account for the forest by discussing only the biology of a single tree. Interest in all sorts of subjects, including NDEs, will depend on their public contexts. Understanding those contexts helps us gain insight into our private responses to NDEs. This, in turn, may help us identify and evaluate biases in our own discussions and those of others.

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NOTES


ERRATA

APOLLOGY. A steep cost increase (and time constraints!) prevent a move to 4 issues per year at present (Bulletin 4). We remain at 3 issues/year: January; May; September.

GLENN FALKENSTEIN (Bulletin 1, page 8). Sources tell us that Falkenstein is a well-known magician in California. Thus, his ability to read the number on a banknote over a telephone line is probably a conjuring trick, rather than evidence for subvocalisation, as postulated by R.I. Rosenberg.
In recent years there has been an explosion of interest in near-death experiences (NDEs), and many books and articles have been published (e.g., 6, 14, 15, 19, 21, 22, 23, 27). Although Moody in 1975 stimulated recent interest (14), reports go far back into history (17, 21, 32). As long ago as 1892, Swiss geologist Heim studied 30 NDEs, mostly from Alpine climbers (32). Many collections of cases now exist (5, 4, 12, 16, 17, 18, 25, 27, 22).

**CHARACTERISTICS**

Raymond Moody was one of the first to offer a composite picture of the NDE based on more than 100 personal accounts. His definition is still valid: "A man is dying and, as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by the doctor. He begins to hear ... a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving very rapidly through a long dark tunnel ... he sees his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resurrection attempts from this unusual vantage point. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving, warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before (a being of light) appears before him. This being asks a question, possibly, to make him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic instantaneous playback of the major events of his life ... he finds himself approaching some sort of barrier ... apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet ... the time for his own death has not yet come ... he resists ... (he) does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love, and peace ... he somehow reunites with his physical body and lives. Later, he tries to tell others ... he can find no human words adequate to describe these unearthly episodes ... the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life." (4, p21-23).

Any explanation for NDEs must account for the "established facts". Grayson (10) outlines these as:

1. A strong positive effect.
2. The conviction one has died.
3. An out-of-body experience.
4. The tunnel or "light" experience.
5. Encountering unearthly beings and realms.
6. The life review.

Subjective impressions include distortion of space and time (slowing of time, a sense of detachment), speeded-up thoughts, and a lack of emotion. Great difficulty occurs in putting the experience into words. Note that Moody's "perfect case" is a composite; no one case has yielded all the components.

The following categories of explanations have been advanced: (A) mundane; (B) religious; (C) pharmacological; (D) physiological; (E) neurological; (F) psychological; and (G) the parapsychological holomorphic model of Ring.

(A) THE MUNDANE

In reply to Moody, Vaisrub (33) reminds us that as recently as 1968 the standard experience of patients resuscitated after cardiac arrest was very simple. He states: "At the onset of cardiac arrest most patients experience a pleasant feeling as though they were entering a peaceful sleep. There was no fear or anxiety. They became unconscious and were completely unaware of the activities around them ... With resuscitation before serious cerebral damage had occurred, consciousness was regained after variable periods of time ... Many people felt pleasant again and were pleased to know they were still alive" (33, quoting 21).

Vaisrub urges more careful investigation of the complex and emotional recent accounts of NDEs. He did not want to cast doubt on the veracity of the witnesses. "Their hearts may have stopped beating for a minute or more, but their brains remained alive. There is nothing extraordinary, let alone supernatural, in seeing dream-like visions, as consciousness returns to normal" (33).

Cardiologist Michael Sabom (27) admitted that after first reading Moody's book, he felt the accounts were either fabrications or embellishments by Moody. He later recanted. Sabom, however, did explore the possibility of subconscious fabrication, a desire to overcome the threat of death by inventing a NDE. If this were true, then persons who experienced multiple near-death crises should experience a NDE on each occasion. Interviews, however, revealed that many of these subjects could recall only one NDE. Where persons did encounter multiple NDEs in separate near-death crises, the NDEs took completely different patterns of "ego survival". This was inconsistent with subconscious fabrication.

(B) RELIGIOUS EXPLANATIONS

The NDE sometimes includes a report of having encountered a "being of light". This being may radiate incredible feeling of love, warmth and light. Some persons have identified the being as "God" or "Jesus Christ". Dead relatives and friends are often met in an environment described in "heavenly terms". Indeed, it has been suggested that only those with strong religious beliefs experience and report a NDE (7).

Rawlings (22) examined accounts from India and the USA (19). He pointed out that religious background influenced identification of any "being" encountered. No Christian saw a Hindu deity, and no Hindu saw Jesus (Ring). Ring confirms that NDEs were independent of religious beliefs, but that religious beliefs do influence interpretations.

(C) PHARMACOLOGICAL HYPOTHESES

Schnaper (28) is convinced that all NDEs could be explained in terms of altered states of consciousness, e.g., drug-taking. However Moody (14) states that hallucinations under anesthetics differ from NDE accounts in being generally more vague, and lacking in consistency from account to account. Sabom (27) agrees that hallucinations from medicinal drugs are more variable and idiosyncratic in terms of both content and structure. Rawlings (22) content and structure. Rawlings (22) and Ring (23) state that persons taking hallucinatory drugs were less likely to have a NDE than those on no drugs. Sabom (28) cites persons who have encountered both drug-induced hallucinations and a NDE, and are able to distinguish the two. Moreover, persons who have had no anesthetics or drugs also report NDEs.

(D) NEUROLOGICAL MODELS

Neurology is the diagnosis and treatment of disorders of the nervous system, including the brain. Are NDEs hallucinations produced by temporal-lobe seizures? Dr. Wider Penfield reported hallucinations, distorted perception of the environment, and feelings of detachment, fear, sadness and loneliness when he electrically stimulated the temporal lobes of patients (20a, 25). The electrical stimulation can call back a sequence of past experiences (sights, sounds and thoughts) in great detail; yet the patient is still conscious of the present. The recall stops suddenly when the electric current ceases (25, 27, p 237-8). The mental content experienced during the seizure depended on the fears, hopes and neurotic preoccupation of the person (26).

NDEs and temporal lobe stimulation (TLS) are indeed similar; but Sabom (27) lists several differences:

1. During NDEs, the immediate environment is undisturbed although viewed perhaps from an unusual angle. Such as near the ceiling; it is distorted by TLS.
2. Produces a replay of a single piece of memory (complete with audio and visual modalities) in real time.
3. Has a panoramic memory review, i.e., a rapid succession of life's highlights (a 'life review').
4. With the TLS, smell and taste sensations accompany the visual and auditory modes. Smell and taste are absent from NDEs.
5. NDEs generate calmness, joy and warmth. The TLS causes sadness, fear and loneliness.
6. Forced thinking occurs during the TLS and not during NDEs.

A specific feature of some NDEs is the out-of-body experience. The person says...
they have viewed their body from a
distance, as a thing to be looked at
without emotion. The one common
feature of all NDEs is the "autoscopic
hallucination", where a person sees a
double of himself projected in his
own visual field. The "double" exhibits
identical movements and behaviour as
the percipient (5A). However, Moody
(14) notes that, unlike NDEs,
autoscopic images are often wisp,
transparent, colorless, and seen only
from the chest or neck up.

NDEs normally produce a feeling of
peace, calm, and removal of pain. Is
relief of pain during NDEs an effect
of B-endorphin? This newly tested chen-
tical, when injected into volunteers
with intractable cancer pain, produced
complete relief of pain for periods of
20-70 hours (20). By contrast, calm
and peace is experienced only during the
NDE; physical pain returns immediately
at the end of the NDE (27).

Thus TLS, autoscopic images and B-
endorphin all explain some aspects of
NDEs but not all. However, psychologist
Ronald Siegel (29,30) suggests that a
combination of both is needed. He
argues that imagery in NDEs and hall-
ucinations (bright lights, colors and
tunnels) are alike, and are probably
caused by physiologic sensations arising
from discharge of neurons in the eye. The more complex
imagery is determined by ex-
pertations, attitudes and the physical
and psychological environment. Inef-
ability characterises peak and mystical
experiences. Hearing of voices is much
more likely to occur among those who
were anesthetized after an operation who recall auditory stimuli during surgery. The meeting of others in afterlife accounts is similar to the "guides" hallucinatory states, and "imaginary companions" of lonely sailors and young children. Siegel's arguments have not yet been mettered point by point.

Saban ignores Siegel.

(E) PHYSIOLOGICAL
Dying is a gradual process; a healthy
heart can produce electrical activity
for 20 minutes after respiration
causes. The final mechanism of death is
anoxia (lack of oxygen to the brain). The
neurological anomaly is the "autoscopic
hallucination", where a person sees a
double of himself projected in his
own visual field. The "double" exhibits
identical movements and behaviour as
the percipient (5A). However, Moody
(14) notes that, unlike NDEs,
autoscopic images are often wisp,
transparent, colorless, and seen only
from the chest or neck up.

The model of Greyson (10) is based
on states of memory. After reactivating
dead memories (Gofl & Hallifax, 11). Perhaps
the hypersecreted state induced by
death evokes long-suppressed memories
of birth memories (Saban, 27). Some
argue that the NDEs must feature imminent death; this is supported by many of Sabans cases. Also, Greyson dealt with persons psychologically near death, and Saban with those physically near death - two different populations.

Greyson (10) suggests psychological mod-
els by listing aspects of NDEs often
thought impossible in such models: (1)
Their paranormal component; (2)
Their positive transformatve effect on
the individual.

He points out that depersonalisation
and regression apply to all cultures, and
that the paranormal output may
ultimately be shown to be related to
satisfaction of psychological needs. As
regards positive effects, he cites the
long-used idea of psychosis that men-
tal dysfunction (disturbance of normal
functioning) may lead to positive per-
sonality transformations.

(G) PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL HологRAPHIC MODEL
After a critical review of the other
models, Ring proposed his own. The
feelings of peace, painlessness, and
of being out-of-the-body, results from a
disembodied consciousness (23, p 221),
typical of the OBE reported in the
psychic literature (15,15). The tunnel
indicated a move to a higher level of
consciousness. The light represented
the energy level of this new state,
associated with a "being of light"
(oneself; total self). The realm vent-
tured into is created by the mind, much
as a laser creates a hologram.

Ring's model has been little discussed.
It is difficult to prove or disprove.
Ehrenwald (5) argued against the
OBE phase. He suggests that the OBE
derives from the quest for immortality,
taking the dead back to life, and back
to that of Priester in 1950.

CONCLUSION
This review reveals many, at times
incompatible, models for the cause of
NDEs. I believe there may be a
methodological error in research to date. All models seem to fail because they are unable to explain all aspects of NDEs. However, the 'out-of-body' NDE has never been reported. It is a mental artifact; a composite. Analysis of individual reports may well produce explanations in terms of models in this paper. The individual approach is long overdue.

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SOURCES

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

The books listed below are recommended as the best available either for the layperson or as a refresher for the professional investigator. Investigators should, however, in course of further study, scan the professional journals to keep abreast of the latest research data. Most of the books adopt an objective approach — but an attempt has also been made to cover a diverse range of viewpoints. The books are classified on a 1-5 scale, as follows: 1 = excessively credulous; 3 = neutral/ objective; 5 = excessively critical. This selection is subject to continual revision. An updated list will be sent to any AIPR member upon request. The AIPR can also assist with locating hard-to-get and out-of-print books.

See Bulletin's 3 & 4 for full list.


BUCHE R.H (1911/19). Cosmic Consciousness. Dayton, New York. (2-21) (A personal mystical experience in 1872 leads this Canadian psychiatrist to study it is others.) 2 - ASCR.

COUSINS N (1983/04). The Healing Heart: Antidotes to Panic and Helplessness. Avon, New York. (3) (Positive thinking and laughter helps a noted journalist recover from a heart attack, without surgery. The second time he has recovered from a fatal illness this way!) 4A - Healing.


REID James (1982). Sorcerers and Healing Spirits. Continuity and Change in an Aboriginal Medical System. ANU Press, Canberra. (3) (Fieldwork at Yarrkla, Arnhem Land, demonstrates how Aboriginal healing systems have adapted to Western influence.) 3 - Anthropology.


NEW BOOKS


EVAHILARY (1984). Visions & Apparitions I Alien Visitors. Aquarian, Wellingham, UK. 13-51. (Lengthy survey of "entity" visions, including haunting; religious; demonic; UFO-type; "doppel-gangers" imaginary childhood companions.)


CASEBOOK

This column summarises some Australian spontaneous cases of psychic phenomena reported to the AIPR. The information is unevaluated and need not have a paranormal explanation. It gives an idea of the type of case that deserves investigation. Cases listed are often more bizarre or complex than the average case of its type. Number in brackets is AIPR file-number.

This challenging case involved multiple witnesses on many occasions. Peter and Faye T and their 3 young children (one baby being 3 months old) lived in a flat at Shoalwater Bay. A neighbor (an ex-police officer), visiting, saw a glass fly through the air at him and shatter into pieces "in mid-air". Several other events were seen by him or others: e.g. a saucepan of boiling water allegedly crashed into a wall above the baby's cot. He called in Rev. Bill Hawker (a Methodist minister). Bill and Faye once saw pegs "fly" out of a bucket. Father Jones (an Anglican priest) baptised the baby in the flat. The bowl of water about to be consecrated "was swept from the table in full view of all assembled". On another day, Dennis Lingane (reporter, Sunday Independent) saw a china mug crash at his feet.

The family shifted to a flat at Medina. The spate of flying objects got worse. John Hudson (reporter, Channel 7, and minister of religion) and cameraman Brian Dunne, visited. As John was doing a "to-camera" piece, they heard a loud crash. John and Brian found a mess of buckets and rags strewn on the floor in another room. As John was checking out the flat, Brian felt a jar of vaseline "whizz" past his hip and hit the wall. Later, both men and Faye were in the kitchen. It is alleged Brian saw a cupboard open and a salt shaker "fly" out, tip upside down, spill salt in "figure-8" patterns, turn upright again, and return to the drawer. It is not clear what John and Faye saw.

No-one was hurt by the fast-flying objects. Nor did anyone (?) see the objects actually "take off". Faye was not seen to throw any object. Her location is not stated during some of the incidents. Faye was a lonely, distressed, too-young wife, with 3 young children to bring up. Her husband (who avoided interviews) was unemployed. Faye seemed afflicted by a deep trauma. [Howard-Wright: Eyewitness Australian Ghosts, 1980: 143-154].

[048] APPARITION. New Farm(Q). 12-84.
Mr & Mrs Fowler live in a flat above an old shop. About Dec. 13, at 11 P.M., Mrs F saw a faint apparition emerge from a wall of the stairwell, cross a landing halfway up a staircase, and vanish through a street door. She saw it again 2 weeks later. On Jan 2 at 2:26 P.M. Mrs F was going to the toilet. A small female ghost was standing on the landing; it had a light grey glowing shroud. The face was in shadow. Mrs F's cat went berserk. Nell Brennan, 28, was suffocated to death in the shop in 1949. [Adelaide News 3/1/85].

Solicitor Yvon Wigley was jailed for one year for stealing $2 million from a trust account. She gave most of the money away. Psychologist Michael Weston described 4 other personalities: Kate (a flirt); Maria (a saintly nun); Jane (an aggressive schemer, who stole the money); and Mary (generous, who gave it away). All personalities, named after her dolls, had been with Yvon since childhood. Eleven other personalities possibly exist. Weston recommended therapy rather than prison, to prevent further disintegration of her personality [Weekend Australian 10-11/11/84; Sunday Telegraph 11/11/84].