

Dissertation

Chapter 1

Introduction 11-15 pages, how I became involved, do this from my head.

Brief overview – Concept Paper

Statement of problem

Brief description of problem

What I am going to do to show what the different chapters will be about

The full literature review-30 pages 240 pages, 100 references.

Chapter 2

Methodology

Phenomenological research aims

How to find subjects

What to give them

Consent forms, precautions to protect them

How to record information, tape, interview, questionnaires, etc.

What am I going to extract from the questionnaires, cultural themes. Things that emerge that provide insight into near-death experiences.

Write up each case history and give back to subject to see if I got it right and at the end send them a report back.

6 to 8 subjects.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Review of Literature

Introduction

In the winter of 1982, during my senior year in college, I underwent surgery for injuries related to a car accident. Three days after the surgery, I recalled an experience that occurred during the surgery. I recalled a tense atmosphere in the surgery room just as I went unconscious from anesthesia. The doctor's last words echoed in my head, and the next thing I knew I was sitting up in total darkness being greeted by a being whom I had never before met. During the experience, I felt an exchange of incredible love with the being. I felt completely at peace with this being and felt none of the pain of my injuries. I was surprised to have the complete use of my limbs, which were severely injured in the accident.

I walked down a long, dark hallway with the being at my right side. During this walk down the hallway, I had the feeling of a completion of my life. Everything felt right. It was the same feeling one has when finishing a good book. In the process of reading a book, one is totally immersed in the individual pages being read. However, when one finishes the book, one's understanding broadens, giving one a sense of the entirety of the book. I experienced that sense of entirety, although I did not recall experiencing a life review. What I remember was a sense of completion.

At the end of the hallway, we came to a great wall made of black and red bricks. Both of us stood before the wall and at that moment, I was gripped with an uncomfortable feeling. I was told to touch the wall. I did not respond. I was told to do so a second time and once more I did not respond. At the third request of the being, he picked up my arm and hand and asked me to touch the wall. I replied, "If I do, will I die?" The being then, to the best of my recollection, laughed and said, "You know that death is just an illusion; life is eternal. Now, touch the wall, I cannot do it for you." At that moment, I perceived my paternal grandmother on the other side of the wall telling me to not touch the wall and to go back, that it was not time. I lifted my arm and hand out of the being's hand and said "no."

Instantly, I felt a physical rushing of my etheric body through empty space while being told I would completely heal. I opened my eyes in the recovery room of the hospital. As foretold, my body did fully heal. I was left bewildered by the experience. Slowly, a mild anxiety crept over me. Had I rejected an offer of heaven? If so, would I be re-admitted later? It was at that point that I began a journey that has eliminated my fear of death and has piqued my interest in near-death experiences.

Human beings have always been fascinated with death and the possibilities of what lies beyond it. It is currently not possible for us to know what happens to the human soul beyond death, since one must die and not return. Passing through the boundaries that separate the living from the dead

has been an activity relegated largely to spiritualists and shamen. They have historically served as intermediaries between the world of the living and dead.

Many of us liken the process of dying to process of going to sleep. We describe the corpse of an individual as appearing to be sleeping. A terminally ill individual is said to be going to his or her final resting-place. We even use a euphemism for euthanasia with our animals, "putting them to sleep." All of this implies a final and terminal extinguishing of consciousness. As a society, to be realistic about death is to view it as an irreversible final experience. It is the quintessential end of consciousness and self-awareness.

In this research, I want to present evidence for an alternative to that view. It is becoming more widely known that there are ordinary people who may have journeyed very close to the boundary between life and death and may have even glimpsed the potential for life beyond death. People who are believed to have had a close brush with their own mortality while perceiving life beyond our own Earthly experience are said to have had a near-death experience or an NDE.

The near-death experience is a self-reported encounter with death. During the experience, such people claim to have traveled to an apparent world beyond the one that we know of in this physical reality. They often return with the belief that they had died and were returned to this reality for some reason that is not always clear to them. With the advent of modern technology for saving lives so close to the brink of death, reports of such incidents are on the rise.

People who have reported a near-death experience often have been pronounced clinically dead for some period. During that period, such individuals may have begun what could be considered the journey to the realm of life after death. They might experience a separation from their bodies, meeting with other beings, and a life review. These individuals, however, perceive that they are not able to remain in that realm and for various reasons will self-report an experience of being called back into their body. For obvious reasons, we may never know with certainty what takes place after death; however, those who say they have undergone a near-death experience may be able to tell us what happens at the border of the frontier beyond this life. Could those who have experienced a near-death experience actually bear witness to an archetypal rite of passage to the world beyond? Is the near-death experience a rite of passage to spiritual maturity in the present life? Can archetypal images of the collective unconscious be found in the near-death experience? These issues and more will be discussed in the body of the work.

Brief Overview of the Literature

Historical Perspectives of Near-Death Experiences

Carol Zaleski (1987) explores in her book *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times*, a historical perspective on near-death experiences dating back to early Christianity. In the book, she does a comparative study of near-death

experiences from medieval Christendom and modern secular society. She explores how cultural biases and historical events shape and influence interpretations of near-death experiences. Her research allows us to view the historical roots of near-death experiences. She gives us a sense of the rich history that NDEs have developed.

Humans, it is commonly believed, are the only creatures capable of contemplating their own deaths. We are intensely aware of our eventual demise and have developed myths, stories, and rites as a way of giving meaning and understanding to the death experience. Edgar Herzog (1966) explores the myths that have developed in our past and that persist in modern culture in his book *Psyche and Death*. "In some such way as this man may have evolved and matured his view of the world and his consciousness of existence, as a result of his repeated encounters with death" (p. 17). NDEs themselves may also be an expression of and a tool in our development as humans.

Common Components of Near-Death Experiences.

Raymond Moody (1977) mentions in his book *Life After Life* that there are several re-occurring components during near-death experiences, such as a sense of well-being, a sense of being healed, and confrontation with a barrier that must be crossed, to name a few. Not every NDE includes all of the components, nor has a single component appeared in every case. In all of the cases he has studied, no two NDEs are exactly alike.

The exploration of components common to NDEs have also been recognized and identified by both Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1988a) in her lecture at Humana Hospital and by Kenneth Ring (1980) in his book *Heading Toward Omega*. Both of these authors clearly state that there are specific and dramatic common elements shared by people who have a near-death experience. Some of the more common points are feeling a separation from the body, seeing a dark tunnel, seeing a light, stepping into the light, and feeling a sense of peace.

Dr. Kubler-Ross (1988b), in a recorded lecture in 1988 in Virginia titled *Life After Death*, mentions that in several cases of people who were blind from birth, upon their near-death experience they were able accurately to describe objects in the room where they seemed to have died. These people claimed to have gained sight as well as claimed to have experienced an NDE. Steven T. Tart, in his book *Transpersonal Psychologies* (1975), mentions that there are hundreds of verifiable cases of people who have left their bodies and have been able to describe events that have taken place in other locations with accuracy while they were presumably dead. His research lends support to the idea that the body and soul may be able to function separately and apart from one another especially during times of extreme physical trauma. It lends evidence to the theory that the soul separates from the body at the time of death.

Statistical Data on Near-Death Experiences

Between 1980 and 1981 George Gallup conducted research on the subject of near-death experiences. He discovered through his research that approximately 5% of the adult population in the United States had experienced an NDE (Ring, 1984). Approximately 8 million people in the United States alone claim to have had a near-death experience. Of the United States population, 67% believe in life after death (Gallup, 1982).

In 1975, Raymond Moody published the phrase "near-death experience" for the first time (Peay, 1991). It was his attempt to classify an unusual experience involving the sense of passing into another reality such as when a person was critically ill and on the verge of death. According to George Gallup, approximately 35% of people who have come close to death and survived have had a near-death experience (Ring, 1984).

The Effect of the Near-Death Experience on the Individual

In general, people who have had an NDE tend to be reserved in speaking about them. They are a very private and intimate experience for people that are not readily shared with others. However, just the mention of having had such an experience can exert a great deal of public pressure on the experiencer. When someone identifies himself or herself as being a near-death experiencer, the public tends to react in one of two ways. Either the experiencer is not believed outright and thought to be hallucinating or lying, or the public attributes some type of supernatural power to the experiencer and thus attributes to them unrealistic wisdom or sagehood.

When the experiencer fails to live up to the expectations, he or she may experience rejection from those who put them up on the pedestal in the first place (Peay, 1991). In either case, when near-death experiencers come forward to relate their stories, they open themselves up to experiencing unwelcomed and nonsupportive public response.

According to the literature research, all of the authors agree that people go through sweeping changes in attitude and behavior after a near-death experience. Often, they will undergo an expanded belief in spirituality and God, feel a sense of direction in their lives, and allow a sense of unconditional love to rule their decisions in life (Harris & Bascom, 1990). The changes that the experiencer goes through can be very frightening for their family and friends (Harris & Bascom, 1990). These changes can be abrupt and disruptive to the lives of those who have had a near-death experience. An NDE can even cause a spiritual crisis for those who are not prepared for such spiritual growth at that time in their lives (Peay, 1991).

Statement of the Problem

The proposed study will address the following question: How does the near-death experience affect the beliefs and attitudes of those who have experienced them and can the near-death experience be an archetypal rite of passage for spiritual maturity? The study will approach this research question from a phenomenological perspective, describing and analyzing the lived experience of individuals who have personally encountered a near-

death experience as defined by the study. The study will focus on the feelings, attitudes, thoughts, and reflections and other psychological components that convey the subjects existential reality of their experience.

This approach satisfies the requirements for a phenomenological approach according to Becker (1992), who states that "phenomenologists study situations in the everyday world from the viewpoint of the experiencing person" (p. 7). Becker also notes that "phenomenologists study people's experience of everyday life within a definite philosophical context that generates specific assumptions about human nature and human living" (p. 9).

Specific research questions within this problem include the following:

1. Can near-death experiences be attributed common characteristics that are shared by those who claim to have experienced them?
2. How does the near-death experience affect the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of those who have experienced them?
3. Can the near-death experience contain the elements of a rite of passage?
4. How did the subjects' spiritual beliefs affect the way they made sense of their experiences?
5. What are the archetypal images contained in the near-death experience and do they hold meaning for those who survive?
6. Can the NDE assist an individual into spiritual maturity?

Brief Description of Problem

Near-death experiences have received increasing attention during the past two decades through the pioneering work of Kubler-Ross (1983,1988a, 1988b), Moody (1975,1977), Moody and Pearl (1991), Tart (1975), and others. Yet, a great deal more must be learned about these experiences if we are to understand their psychological and spiritual importance in human life. This phenomenological study investigates near-death experiences and their effects on the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of people who have encountered them.

This study also brings focus to the sense of special wisdom that people feel they bring back from near-death experiences. It inquires into the nature of this wisdom and asks whether common themes are reported by different subjects. The exploration will study the archetypal images contained within the near-death experiences. It will also inquire whether the near-death experience contains the elements of a rite of passage and if so, ask whether this rite of passage has any significance for the survivors such as passage into spiritual maturity. Finally, the study will examine the effects of having had this unexpected mystical experience, and will ask how individuals are able to integrate such an experience into their lives.

The near-death experience not only affects the lives of those who undergo them, but it touches those with whom they have come in contact. Through their experiences, we may learn to understand individual, cultural,

and archetypal realities more deeply. Their stories may assist us in finding deeper meaning in our own lives and deaths.

Full Literature Review

Death in Our Lives

That we are born means that we will die. "The body and flesh are identified with death because anything that is born into spatio-temporal existence must submit to the limitations of that existence, which includes an end, death" (Edinger, 1985, p. 95). In that statement, Edinger eloquently notes the inseparable association between life and death. However, the knowledge of our own demise is a subject we choose to avoid in our current culture of scientific thinking. Such thoughts only raise our level of anxiety since death, in the Western way of thinking is perceived as the end of existence.

As children, we generally have no knowledge of death before the age of 3 (Becker, 1973). By the age of 9, almost all children realize the inevitability of death. How a child relates to and handles the subject of death has much to do with the influence exerted by parents and society on this topic. However, the fear of death seems to be a universal one. Becker states, "The fear of death is natural and is present in everyone, that it is the basic fear that influences all others, a fear from which no one is immune, no matter how disguised it may be" (1973, p. 15).

The number of ways people die is surprisingly small. According to Carrington, there are only three ways of dying. The first is asphyxiation. Unconsciousness and death are caused by imperfect oxidation in the blood. The second is by syncope. This is a sudden death from an accident or blood clot. It is a very fast way of dying. The third and final way, according to Carrington, that death comes upon us is through the breakdown of vital organs or function. This is a slow and lingering process for death (Carrington, 1957). Any one of these may trigger NDEs.

Death brings with it a sense of powerlessness that can be terrifying in our present culture. Such fear is only intensified by the culture's current scientific, linear thinking, which requires us to distance ourselves from what we want to know in order to understand it. Thus, we remove death from its natural context in life in order to understand it, just as we attempt to understand life without reference to death. This way of thinking separates the reality of death from our daily lives, and with it, the familiarity and understanding that comes from its intimate contact.

Linear and Circular ways of Viewing Death

Scientific reasoning is linear; in other words, it is thinking that moves in a direction away from its origin. Progress is not imagined to circle back upon itself but to proceed forward. Birth is conceived of as the origin and death is the end, affording no hope of rebirth from death. "If death is perceived as the ultimate end rather than one part of a larger process, the meaning of each

individual life becomes precarious" (Chidekel, 1993, p. 1). Such ways of knowing death can be frightening to most people. When death is the final act of life and there is no hope for resurrection, life can become a threatening experience with the knowledge that death, the end of existence, is all that waits for us in the end. Death through the lens of linear thinking, therefore, is not understood as a part of a circle of life. It is a feared and resented foe to be vanquished. Since we do not have control over this foe, we decide to remove it from our sight. By removing it from our lives, it becomes a stranger to our existence.

In the 15th century, linear perspective was developed and vision became the primary way of knowing (Romanyshyn, 1993). The strong influence of linear perspective continues today. We choose to deny death by removing it from our line of vision. This is brought about "precisely in banishing from the sight of the public not only death but, with it, its icon. Relegated to the secret, private space of the home or the anonymity of the hospital, death no longer makes any sign" (Aries, 1977/1981, p. 266).

To know death would create a source of internal tension, because we wish to remain innocent of its existence. As Romanyshyn (1993) points out, "All knowing sets up a tension between the desire to not know and the call to know" (Romanyshyn, 1993). By removing it from our sight, we are not called to know it and therefore eliminate the tension.

It is an unofficial cultural taboo for a person of science to think in any other manner but linear. To speak of near-death experiences as a scientist

or researcher, one risks being ostracized from his or her community and losing credibility.

Despite growing public acceptance of the authenticity of near-death experiences (NDEs), the general scientific and medical attitude remains unconvinced and disapproving, even scorn all of the whole theory. This attitude is rooted in the scientific dogma of not accepting anything as valid anything unavailable for physical examination. The rub is that consciousness can not be confined or confirmed in a laboratory. (Crabbendan, 1992, p.202)

Aside from the reluctance that researchers may have from speaking about near-death experiences, many of those who have had near-death experiences are reluctant to speak about them as well. They fear receiving the same negative reactions that researchers try to avoid. Often, they do not want to transgress the taboo of contradicting linear thinking, because it makes them the target of other people's fear and scorn.

Death itself is a transgression against life and is therefore frightening to people. However, as Highwater (1994) has pointed out, "Until you transgress, you do not know the unknown. Sexuality is one of the most profound taboos, sexuality is visible in everything." It may be added that death is visible in everything as well, for life and death go hand in hand. Both sexuality and death are spoken in public in only the most hushed of voices.

Transgression is in the realm of Joseph Campbell's hero. The archetypal hero is one who transgresses and descends into the underworld where he overcomes trials and returns to the surface triumphantly with a gift for others. Those who have had a near-death experience can relate to Joseph Campbell's hero. They too make a transgression through their

apparent death and find themselves on an adventure where they return to life with a gift for others. Such is the journey of the hero.

We have lost our alchemical connections with death through linear thinking. We may have entered a time when our collective unconscious is calling out for a reconnection with an alchemical understanding of our world that includes the understanding and integration of death in our lives. Death completes the hermetic circle of life. "As the *opus circulatorium* closes, the end returns to the beginning, the act of death to the act of primal conception" (Fabricius, 1976, p. 181). The proliferation of near-death experiences may hold a key for our society to regain a connection to our spiritual selves. In and of itself, regardless of the implications of near-death experiences on after-death experiences, the experience itself draws attention to the connection between the world and soul. Those who have had the experience are the archetypal heroes who bear the gift of this awareness for the rest of the world.

Death, in the alchemical sense, is a part of the cycle of life and rebirth. "The *umbra solis* signifies the projecting alchemist's experience of ultimate death in its unity with primal birth" (Fabricius, 1976, p. 195). The alchemist always considered life and death to be connected to one another. They were united and inseparable. "Mortificatio is the most negative operation in alchemy. It has to do with darkness, defeat, torture, mutilation, death, and rotting. However, these dark images often lead over to highly positive ones --

growth, resurrection, rebirth" (Edinger, 1985, p. 148). Edinger's words speak of death leading to life within the circular alchemical context.

We do all we can to save the body while it is living with little regard for quality of life. A doctor's first obligation is to preserve life. This obligation often overshadows consideration for the patient's quality of life. By doing so, life itself is no longer viewed in the light of being sacred. It is the body, not the life, that has become important. Consequently, the journeys of the soul at the time of a near-death experience have no relevance in our institutions of healing and therefore are afforded no significance. As a result, little data collection is done by these institutions in regards to near-death experiences.

An illness of the body is viewed as a problem, which needs to be solved. Although it is important to heal the body, it often becomes the focus of our efforts and the needs of the soul are passed by. "People feel that if we solve the problem, we do not need to nourish the soul" (Moore, 1993, September). The body is reduced to little more than a machine and the sacredness of the combination of body and soul is eliminated. Death, then becomes a failure rather than a transition. As a culture, we hide our faults.

By removing death from our consciousness and trying to deny the accompanying emotional suffering, we are compounding the problems with our own relationship to death. We are stunting our own emotional development. When it comes time for us to face our own death, we may face a spiritual or personal crisis for not allowing ourselves to experience the emotional suffering of others that would challenge us and allow us to grow

from the pain of loss. Harris states that "Neurotic suffering arises from a conflict between the longing of growth and freedom on the one hand and the inability or refusal to pay the required price in developmental suffering on the other" (1996, p. 26).

Those who speak of their near-death experiences challenge us to think about our own deaths. That is something that many individuals do not want to tolerate. "Pascal wrote that it 'is easier to endure death without thinking about it than the thought of death without the danger of dying" (Aries, 1977/1981, p. 22).

Traditions and Death

Western cultures have lost much of the vitality of their religious traditions, according to Grof (1980), and therefore, they have lost an understanding and curiosity about the afterlife. Our sophistication and obsession with materialism has yielded Western society a void in afterlife beliefs.

In the Cartesian-Newtonian world view, consciousness is the product of the brain and, as such, ceases at the time of physical death. Although there are disagreements about whether death should be defined as cessation of heart-beat or extinction of electrical brain activity, the idea of consciousness after death is incompatible with materialistic science. (Grof, 1980, p.7)

It is no wonder that people of our culture fear death as the demise of their being. This study on near-death experiences may help to alleviate that fear.

According to Stanislav and Cristina Grof, near-death experiences hold archetypal images that transcend cultural and time barriers across the human experience. Humans have long questioned their origins and deaths. Religious traditions have expounded a belief in the afterlife. This belief has been used by religious organizations throughout history for both self-serving and altruistic ends. Many religions have used frightening images of Hell to retain a loyal following of their believers and have promised images of Heaven for those who adhere to the religious leaders' demands. Likewise, images of life after death have been used to inspire and relieve anxieties about death.

Early Research on NDEs

Albert Heim, a Swiss geologist, was the first person to research into near-death experiences in the late 19th century. After having had a personal experience himself related to an accident, he began to collect data from those who had had near-fatal accidents and who were willing to tell their stories. He discovered that during a near-death experience, an individual passes through a series of distinct self-reported experiences. He observed that in 95% of the cases he studied, "time became greatly expanded, and individuals acted with lightning speed and accurate reality-testing" (Grof, 1980, p. 9). His findings revealed that this phase was followed by a sudden life-review. As the experience continued, the individuals experienced a sense

of transcendental peace, accompanied by visions of supernatural beauty and the sound of celestial music.

Russell Noyes, in 1971, followed Heim in his studies on near-death experiences. He was able to identify three progressive stages individuals go through during a near-death experience. The first stage he called the resistance phase. Resistance to death marks this stage. Noyes claimed that during the first stage of the experience, individuals recognize a threat to their lives, and then proceeds to struggle to save their lives before finally accepting the possible reality of death. The second stage in the near-death experience he described as the life-review. During the life-review, he contends that individuals experience a condensed detailed review of their lives. The final stage he referred to as the transcendence stage. It is during this stage that he claimed the experiencer became aware of the mystical qualities of the experience (Grof, 1980).

Raymond Moody, Jr., MD, a psychiatric resident at the University of Virginia Hospital, is another of the early pioneers in near-death experience research. He has written two very popular books, *Life after Life* and *Reflections on Life after Life*. His work popularized the concept of near-death experiences. Out of concern for his reputation, he wanted to stress that he was not out to prove life after death. Such an attempt would likely have discredited him in the medical community, as it would have broken the medical model taboo. Raymond Moody “remains active in the field of near-death studies, however, working vigorously to persuade those in clinical

practice of the need to listen and respond with sympathy to their patients' near-death testimony" (Zaleski, 1987, p.104).

Dr. Michael Sabom, director of Cardiovascular Services at St. Luke's Hospital in Denver, was inspired by Dr. Raymond Moody's book, *Life after Life* in 1976 and spent 5 years researching into near-death experiences on his own. He had access to valuable hospital records that would provide a reliable basis for this information. During that time, he conducted 116 interviews. Upon the completion of his research, he wrote a book called *Recollections of Death, A Medical Investigation*. His book largely supports the conclusions drawn by Dr. Moody.

Dr. Sabom (1982) discovered that during a near-death experience, individuals experience a general separation of self from their physical bodies and would find themselves located at a point at ceiling level above their bodies.

All persons in this study who related an NDE described it as if it had taken place outside their physical body. They felt the 'essential' part of themselves had separated from the physical, and that this part was able to perceive objects and events visually. During the NDE, the 'separated self' became the sole 'conscious' identity of the person, with the physical body remaining behind as an empty shell" (Cranston & Williams, 1984, p. 123).

This type of experience is known as an autoscopic or out-of-body experience.

It is this finding that led Dr. Sabom to change his perspective on NDEs.

Dr. Sabom originally set out to discredit the notion of near-death experiences. As a consequence of his research, he became convinced of

their validity. During an interview with *Time* magazine on February 8, 1982, Dr. Sabom was quoted saying, "five years and 116 interviews later, I am convinced that my original suspicions were wrong" (Cranston & Williams, 1984, p. 120).

Alchemical vs. Scientific Ways of Knowing Near-Death Experiences

If we view near-death experiences through alchemical ways of knowing, we begin to understand their interconnection with all life. Near-death experiences then become a symptom of expression in the body of nature. "What we have lost comes back to us as a symptom. Symptoms are a way of asking us to return to a remembrance" (Romanyshyn, 1993). Near-death experiences become a symptom of something we have lost our connection to the cycle of life. Death, in the alchemical sense, is a part of the cycle of life and rebirth.

Modern man avoids understanding himself. Such understanding would only lead him deeper into self-awareness and feelings that would lead him out of the paradise of ignorance and into the curse and wound of knowledge. Man has become lazy about understanding himself and looking deeper into his meaning. Near-death experiences have become a way for consciousness to dramatize that fact by affecting those from all lifestyles and spiritual beliefs.

Those who return from near-death experiences often times bring with them a message of hope and spiritual awareness. If we listen to their

experiences, it forces us to look deeper inside of ourselves. As we look deeper into ourselves, we are called to individuate. Our scientific way of thinking has pulled us far away from our connection with the earth by separating us away from that which we want to know.

To experience individuation, one must be left in the original context of one's environment, as individuation implies that a preexisting relationship must exist from which to individuate. Scientific thinking does not have the capacity to acknowledge differentiation in terms of relationships, since separating the subject from its environment is the current way of deriving knowledge. Therefore, as scientific ways of knowing are dominant in this culture, differentiation of individuals is not an encouraged way of being. "Anonymity abounds with a pervasive incapacity to experience individuality" (Sardello, 1992, p. 71).

Scientific thinking has led to our alienation from one another through distancing. This form of knowledge does not allow for emotions to assist in our understanding. In scientific thinking, "emotions are moved outside of one's self" (Romanyshyn, 1993). Alchemically, death is a process that leads to the withdraw of projection and to individuation. "The death of a loved one is an aspect of individuation" (Edinger, 1985, p. 202). The near-death experience may therefore be an individuation process distrusted by scientific thinking.

Near-death experiences have brought a spiritual awareness of death back into modern life. They are a symptom of a suffering by the soul of the

world. They are a sign to draw our attention away from the superficialities of life and to look deeper into the soul of the world. We are being called to bring soul back into our lives. It is drawing us away from linear scientific thinking and its separation from nature to a more alchemical way of knowing which embraces life and moves in harmony with it. To live with harmony and respect for all life and its forms and stages while remaining open to feeling and hearing the voice of the world is to live with soul. That seems to be our greatest challenge and lesson of life today in knowing our world. "The only solid piece of scientific truth about which I feel totally confident, writes a physician and biologist of distinction, Dr. Lewis Thomas, is that we are profoundly ignorant about nature. Indeed, I regard this as the major discovery of the past hundred years of biology" (Cranston & Williams, 1984, p. 29).

Near-death experiences may be an avenue created within life to fill the spiritual void created by our secular society as a way of re-connecting us to our spiritual side. Those individuals who have had such experiences bring with them hope for existence beyond this world. It is an experience that is as much for society as it is for the individual. They have truly gone in to the realm of the spiritual and have returned with a message of hope for life beyond this world. They carried with them the message of spiritual existence that is as real as the world that we see around us today.

If life is going to have an end, we do not hold ourselves accountable for it and feel no need to understand ourselves on a deeper level, since it will

end anyway. The soul of the world knows better than this. Its reality is circular. It is now coming forward to awaken humankind from its long, sleepy delusion of finality. Soul now challenges us to take accountability for our actions and reawaken through alchemical ways of knowing to the circularity and harmony of life.

Soul is choosing to confront our linear ideas with the most fearful idea to that way of knowing, death. For linear thinking, death is the unquestionable end. However, death leads back to the beginning when we use alchemical ways of thinking. Through our understanding of near-death experiences, we are being brought into a search for greater meaning in our lives while being directed to reconnect with the earth. A new consciousness is gently moving us away from ways of knowing that are scientific and isolating to ways of knowing that are alchemical and harmonious.

However, we cannot hide from death. We have consciousness, and with consciousness, comes awareness of our own demise. "He was given consciousness of his individuality and his part-divinity in creation At the same time he was given the consciousness of the terror of the world and of his own death and decay" (Becker, 1973, p. 69). Knowledge of our death has forced us to leave the paradise of ignorance. To gain knowledge, we must leave the paradise of innocence. To leave this innocence for knowledge, we are cursed and wounded (Romanyshyn, 1993). The wound is the awareness of our own demise. We are then cursed to carry that knowledge with us the rest of our lives.

Historical Perspectives on Near-Death Experiences

Deeply embedded in many cultures around the world is the belief that the soul of an individual is distinct and separate from the body. Throughout history, many cultures have extolled the belief that the body and soul were separate entities. It is essential that the body and soul be separate and distinct in order for a theory of near-death experiences to develop.

A kind of dualism begins to appear in the understanding of the fate of the dead, a polarity between the idea, on the one hand, of a spiritual realm, free of matter and near to God, in which the liberated "soul" of man floats and on the other, of a more matter-bound realm which is associated with a repetition of the life-and-death cycle. (Von Franz, 1987, p. 4)

This life/death cycle opens the door to our understanding of near-death experiences.

Von Franz (1987) goes on to state, "As the logos of a tree (the 'principle' of the tree) lies hidden in its seed, so does the seed of the resurrection body lie hidden within the old body" (p. 7). The same may be said for the human experience as well. "However, the risen body which will spring out of it will no longer be of a coarse material but of a spiritual, even of a divine, nature" (Von Franz, 1987, p. 8). Many individuals may have experienced divine nature of their spiritual bodies during their NDE.

In prehistoric times, human beings began a journey of specialization in the division of labor. Among the first specialties in the division of labor was that of the shaman. The shaman was the carrier of information between that

of the living and of the dead. “The shaman inaugurates his career as a ‘specialist in ecstasy’ by a symbolic encounter with death, whether brought on spontaneously by illness or seizure, or deliberately courted through ritual mimesis or psychophysical techniques” (Zalenski, 1987, p.13). Grof (1994) explains:

The opportunity to experience death without actually dying, visit the realm of the dead and return, or communicate with the world of spirits, has been offered in many different frameworks since the dawn of human history. Shamanism is the earliest form of experiencing the phenomenon of death and returning to life.” (p. 20)

The specialization of shaman is a testament to the early beliefs that life existed beyond what was experienced on earth. It was believed that an encounter with death would have a profound effect on the soul and thus would effect the direction that individual took in life. I contend that the same holds true today. Belief in life after death is not a trendy diversion of mundane interest, but rather a deeply ingrained concept that has been with us as long as the existence of humankind. Those who have had the fortune of experiencing the mysteries of what is termed a near-death experience often view it as a meaningful and moving experience that leads them to create positive changes in their lives.

A soul’s journey through the land of the dead has been accounted for in the cultures of antiquity. In Ancient Egypt, the *Book of the Dead* is an elaborate collection of writings left in the tombs of deceased Egyptians to assist them on their journey in the next world (Rossiter, 1979). Ancient Egypt had an elaborate account for what took place at the moment of one’s death.

We find the motifs of the journey most extensively, however in the Egyptian culture of the dead, where the *ba* souls of the blessed complete their journey with the sun God in his bark. The journey to the Beyond follows the path of the sun. It begins with a descent into the underground, into the cave of Sokar, and leads, through various obstructed areas, to the east, where the deceased, together with the sun god, returns to life, rejuvenated. (Von Franz, 1987, pp. 65-66)

The journeys described in the *Book of the Dead* mirror modern-day near-death experiences in that one goes through the death experience and returns to life. It raises the question as to whether some of the authors themselves may have gone through a near-death experience.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead, also known as the *Bardo Thodol*, describes what takes place at the actual moment of death in the terms of 8th century Tibetans (Evans-Wentz, 1960). The *Bardo Thodol* served as a guide for death and the after life.

The Chikhai Bardo describes experiences associated with the moment of death, whose most characteristic feature is a sense of losing thought with the familiar world of polarities such as good and evil, and entering a realm of unreality and confusion. The logical and ordered world that we know from everyday life starts to dissolve, and there follows the sense of uncertainty whether one is attaining enlightenment or becoming insane. The *Bardo Thodol* describes the experiences heralding imminent death in terms of the different elements of the body. (Grof, 1994, p.13)

These experiences are described in three phases, beginning with the first phase as a feeling of earth sinking into water, where one escapes from the pressures of the physical world into the safety of the mind. The second phase is known as the experience of water sinking into fire. Here, thoughts become disturbed and emotions become the only way of relating. The third experience is known as fire sinking into air. During this experience, emotions

seem to dissolve and attention moves away from earthly objects and one experiences the sense of self being blown into atoms.

At the actual moment of death, one has an overwhelming vision of Dharmakaya, or the Primary Clear Light of Pure Reality. It is as if the whole of existence suddenly appeared in its absolute totality and in an entirely abstract form. In the experience, all dualities are transcended. Agony and ecstasy, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, burning heat and freezing cold, all coexist in one undifferentiated whole. Ultimate enlightenment and total insanity seem to be equally plausible interpretations of this experience. In the last analysis, the Dharmakaya is identical with the experiencer's own consciousness, which has no birth and no death, and is by its very nature the Immutable Light. (Grof, 1994, p.13)

The Dharmakaya is similar to the experience of entering the light described by many of those who have experienced a near-death experience. In the light during a near-death experience, individuals report a sense of oneness with life. They often report a sense of becoming one with the light.

During the Middle Ages, great attention was given to what was considered the right way to die. A collection of works was created and dedicated to this end. These works are collectively known as *Ars Moriendi*, or *The Art of Dying*. These books are divided into two categories. The first involves guidance for the process of dying. The second involves an exploration of the relevance of death in our lives. The importance of dying in the Middle Ages is a result of their belief that consciousness continues after death and that guidance is necessary for one to continue in the next life.

During the Middle Ages, there was great uncertainty about life. Wars, epidemics, and famine brought tens of thousands to an early death. During this period, there grew an intense interest in death. It was out of this

environment that *Ars Moriendi, The Art of Dying*, was written. The extensive writings in this work fall into two broad categories. The first category deals with significant matters of death within life. “It emphasizes the importance of the right attitude toward death for life” (Grof, 1994, p. 24). The second category within these writings deals with the experiences of death and dying. They include instruction for the emotional and spiritual support of dying people.

This literature carries in many forms a strong reminder that a life oriented exclusively for material goals is futile and wasted. Such an orientation is based on deep ignorance, and is possible only for those who are not aware of, or have not excepted, the fact that everything in the material world is impermanent and that death is the absolute ruler of life. (Grof, 1994, p. 24)

Grof (1994) felt that the name of *Ars Moriendi* was not an accurate description of this collected body of works and proposed that the name of the works be changed to *Ars Vivendi, The Art of Living*. Grof goes on to state that “the message of the *Ars vivendi (Ars moriendi)* was thus that we should not live purely for worldly pleasures, power and riches, which must inevitably fail us. Instead, we should learn to focus our attention on transcendental realities” (p. 25). As stated by Zalenski, “the medieval visionary is obliged to remember the journey and bring back a report to the living” (Zalenski, 1987, p. 79).

Von Franz (1987) explains that in the Middle Ages death was often represented as a devil with an angel fighting for the soul of a dying person.

This battle, according to Van Franz (1987), was symbolically represented in

Roman gladiator battles:

Ladislaus Boros, the contemporary Catholic theologian, has dealt impressively with the question of death. The idea that death is a kind of struggle at a decisive moment seems to be of an archetypal nature. From his point of view, death is not a simple separation of body and soul but a complete transformation process, which even have an effect on the inner part of the soul itself." (p. 22)

Those who have experienced a near-death experience often claim the spiritual transformation discussed by Von Franz. The process of the near-death experience has transformed them. The point that the death experience is a transformation process hints at the possibility that it may be an archetypal ritual process that one goes through and that those who have experienced a near-death experience may have been witness to such a ritual. This will be discussed later in this writing.

The Near-Death Experience Process

According to Moody (1975), all near-death experiences are distinct from one another. No two identical experiences have been reported. However, there is a collection of information from enough experiences that Moody (1975) was able to construct what might be called a "typical" near-death experience. The following is a description of a "classical" near-death experience. According to Moody (1975), a typical near-death experience would begin at the point of a person's apparent death when he or she might hear a doctor pronounce his or her death from a physical trauma.

Immediately, the individual begins to experience a sense of peace and comfort. He or she then feels himself or herself rising out of body. While rising out of the body, he or she has a sense of being whole and without pain. Sometimes, there is a sense of confusion at this point about what is happening; however, it feels good, and the individual just goes with it.

Next, individuals might begin to experience uncomfortable noise or loud ringing in their ears, while feeling themselves moving very rapidly through a long dark tunnel. At this point, individuals would find themselves outside of their own physical body. However, they remain in the immediate physical environment where they were at the point of their “death.” They then become aware that they are watching the scene around their physical body. They tend to watch it with a sense of detached curiosity. While in this environment, they begin to view their own body from a distance. It is as if the individuals were a ghost viewing themselves. All the while, the individuals are watching the recitation attempt.

After some time passes, they settle into their unusual circumstance. At the point of relaxing into their condition, they begin to notice that they still have a body. According to Moody (1975), they gain a sense that this new body is of a very different nature. It feels as if the physical body has been left behind. Soon, other experiences begin to be felt. They find themselves compelled to leave the scene, heading towards a tunnel. As this is taking place, they sense the presence of others around them. They meet with those spirits who are often reported to be family and friends who have already died.

Margot Grey describes the following account reported by a woman whose heart had stopped when under anesthesia for a routine dental procedure.

When I found myself I was in a beautiful landscape, the grass is greener than anything seen on earth, it has a special light or glow. The colors are beyond description, the colors here are so drab by comparison. . . . In this place, I saw people that I knew had died. There were no words spoken, but it was as if I knew what they were thinking, and at the same time I knew that they knew what I was thinking. (Grey, 1985, p.50)

It is at this point that they meet with a “guide” who leads the way. The guide has also been described as a being of light. This being has been described as a loving spirit whom the individual has never before encountered. “The apparitions seen by the dying are predominantly experienced as guides assisting them in their transition to another mode of existence” (Osis & Haraldsson, 1977, p.66).

At the end of the tunnel, there appears a brilliant light. Within this light, the experiencer senses telepathic communication taking place from either the being of light, or from an unknown source. This is followed by a review of events in their just lived life. “This being asks him a question, non-verbally, to make him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of the major events of his life” (Moody, 1975, pp. 21-22).

Often times, they perceive questions such as “What have you learned from this life?” or “What have you done to contribute love to your world?” before reviewing their life (Harris & Bascom, 1990). Moody (1975) has found

that questions like “What have you done with your life?” have also been asked. All scenes of the life seem to take place at the same time. The questions do not feel like judgment; they are rhetorical and are experienced as coming from a loving place. The judgment of their lives does not seem to come from the external; rather they cast their own judgment on themselves.

In the New American Standard Version of *The Bible*, there is a passage translated to read, “And do not judge lest you be judged, for in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you” (Matthew 7:1-2). If one ponders this passage, it can be understood to say that when one casts judgment on another, one is actually casting judgment upon oneself. Many NDEers claim to have realized this lesson during their experience. “The judgment came from within them. In this state, they seemed to have seen for themselves what they should and shouldn’t have done and to have judged themselves accordingly” (Moody, 1977, p. 167). It may be possible that *The Bible* hints at the life review experience noted by some of those who have had an NDE.

Moody (1975) contends that the experience continues until the individuals find themselves in the presence of a barrier. This barrier might represent the limit between earthly life and the next life. It is communicated to them in some manner that it is not time for them to die. It is at this point that the individuals feel compelled to return to their previous life. Moody claims that this is a point when the individual may resist any attempts to return him/her to their body. He reports that they are enchanted by their

experience and do not want to return to their previous life. “He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love, and peace. Despite his attitude, though, he somehow reunites with his physical body and lives” (Moody, 1975, pp. 21-22).

There are those people who are given the choice of whether they want to stay or not. These people generally report that they were led to a beautiful scene where they are asked if they want to stay. Ultimately the experiencer feels a sensation of moving backwards and returning to the body. It is common when people have this experience of moving back to the body that they feel like they have traveled a great distance to return. Upon returning, people who reviewed experiences in their lives where they did not show love when they had an opportunity often felt emotional pain at the lost opportunity.

People often return from these experiences changed in their outlook on death. As a result of changing their perspectives on death, they often change their perspectives on life.

Later he tries to tell others, but he has trouble doing so. In the first place, he can find no human words adequate to describe these unearthly episodes. He also finds that others scoff, so he stops telling other people. Still, the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life. (Moody, 1975, pp. 21-22)

According to Kenneth Ring (1984), five common experiences are associated with the near-death experiences. They are (a) a sense of peace during the experience, (b) a sense of leaving the body, (c) an awareness of entering darkness, (d) the presence of a bright light, and (e) a sense of

entering that light. Besides the core traits mentioned by Kenneth Ring, NDEs commonly share several other experiences: (a) a review of the life just lived, (b) meeting a being of light, (c) seeing family and friends who have passed on before in a tunnel of light, (d) hearing noises like wind, or flutes, (e) communicating with the being in the light through telepathy, (f) seeing a beautiful scene in nature, (g) being asked if they want to stay, and (h) ultimately feeling the sensation of being pulled back into their bodies (Ring, 1984).

In what Drab (1981) has noted as the “tunnel experience,” he found that most people who experience the tunnel do so with the tunnel being horizontal. Moody and Lindley both acknowledge that individuals undergoing an NDE often experience meeting a being of light. However, Moody (1975) states that the being has a personal quality with a personality whereas Lindley, Bryan, & Conley (1981) contend that the light, although warm and compassionate, is impersonal. No one individual will report having experienced all of the traits reviewed as part of their near-death experience (Moody, 1975).

These are the most common traits known today. However, there is one common element to all stages of the NDE process that individuals report, and that is the vividness of the experience at each stage. Often, individuals experience an enhanced sense of clarity with both visual and auditory perceptions. They also experience a rapid and lucent thought process while

at the same time they experience a sense that they have transcended both space and time (Noyes & Kletti, 1976).

Kubler-Ross, on her tape of *Life, Death and Life after Death* (1988b), speaks of several instances where people have died and described a depiction very close to what was described above. She mentions cases where NDEers meet with relatives in the tunnel of light who were not known to the experiencer to be dead but who in fact died before the NDE. Such testimony seems to lend credibility to the near-death experience accounts reported. Aside from an astoundingly lucky guess, no other explanation can adequately address these accounts.

Moody, Ring, Kubler-Ross, Gallup, Harris, Tart, and many others agree that there are common traits for NDEs. They are also in agreement among themselves as to the traits that are common with NDEs as those mentioned above. Information that is gathered on the common traits of NDEs is completely dependent on the self-reporting of the experiencer. Therefore, the research is not an exact science, but a recounting by people who are usually not scientists. However, a large quantity of data confirming that there are common traits among NDEs has been gathered by the pioneers in this field.

Survey research on NDEs

It is common for those who have had an NDE to have an out-of-body experience involving their immediate environment. About a third of those

who claim to have had a near-death experience report having witnessed the attempted resuscitation attempts (Sabom, 1982). According to Sabom, many were able to give accurate reports on what took place in the environment while they were unconscious.

George Gallup, Jr. discovered that approximately 8 million adults in the United States claimed to have had a near-death experience. Breaking down his analysis of the contents of a near-death experience he found that 26% had an out of body experience, 23% had accurate visual perception, 17% heard audible sounds or voices, 32% had feelings of peace and painlessness 14% experienced the light phenomenon 32% had a life review 32% experienced being in another world 23% encountered other beings and 9% experienced the tunnel (Bailey & Yates, 1996, p. 29).

Nearly every near-death experience of children (and about one fourth of those of adults) has in it an element of light. They all report that the light appears at the final stages of the near-death experience, after they have had an out-of-body experience or have traveled a tunnel. (Morse & Perry, 1990, p. 115)

Each individual, it appears, will have his or her own personal experience that has specific personal meaning. The most common experience during an NDE reported by 48% of experiencers is the feeling of peace and love (Harris & Bascom, 1990). In a survey that compared NDEs resulting from sudden trauma as opposed to prolonged illness, it was discovered that those who were anticipating their deaths through illness experienced religious figures during their NDEs more frequently than those who experienced trauma. "The terminal patients in all of our surveys saw

after life oriented aspirations of dead and religious personages three times as often as do individuals in good health” (Osis, 1977, p. 62).

According to Davy (1979), there was no significant difference in age, sex, race, education, occupation, or formal religious affiliation when patients with NDEs were compared. He did note one significant difference, and that was “a definite decrease in death anxiety occurred in most patients encountering an NDE” (Davy, 1979, p. 33).

According to Bailey (1996), “Cross cultural studies as well as Western case collection reveal a recognizable underlying pattern irrespective of background belief systems or specific content of a set of experiences” (p. 226). Sixty-nine percent of people who had an apparition during an NDE in a United States survey published in 1977 claimed they were guides. In a similar survey done in India, 79% of the people who had an NDE reported an apparition. In the United States, 216 cases were studied whereas 255 cases were studied in India (Osis & Haraldsson, 1977). “A recent survey some colleagues and I conducted in China indicates that the Chinese experience and/or understanding of the NDE may not be very different from the Anglo-European one (Kellehear, 1996, p. 26).

Near-Death Experiences vs. Other Explanations

Other theorists have proposed alternative explanations for near-death experiences to account for the mystical experiences reported. This is an apparent attempt by those theorists to remove NDEs from the realm of the

mystical or metaphysical and situate them within naturally occurring phenomena. These alternative explanations include dreams, Cerebral Hypoxia, hallucinations, and other neurological causes.

Dreams vs. near-death experiences. Dreams are distinct from near-death experiences. There are those who believe that near-death experiences are nothing more than vivid dreaming at the time of a serious trauma. However, dreams vary with content and emotional experience, where the content and process of near-death experiences are more uniform. Although each individual who claims to have had a near-death experience has unique details, the core experience is fundamentally consistent and uniform for all NDEs.

During the experience of an NDE, individuals often claim to be more awake and alive than they feel during a waking experience in life. This is a characteristic not commonly attributed to dreams. The experience is vividly different from that a dream experience in that individuals experience clear and sharp thinking during the NDE (Cranston & Williams, 1984, p. 124).

Dreams have a quality of personal symbolic representation which appears to be absent during the course of a near-death experience. According to Von Franz (1987), tunnel passages are not prevalent in death dreams. Rather, dreams of death are oftentimes represented by darkness that spreads out and hangs over the dreamer. "The nearness of death is frequently represented in dreams by the image of a burglar, that is, by

someone unfamiliar which unexpectedly enters one's present life" (Von Franz, 1987, p. 68).

When an individual has a near-death experience, their experience is significantly different from those of a dream in the lasting effects that it has on the experiencer.

Most dreams are ephemeral, and their affect is soon dissipated, rarely making a deep impression. But the NDE experience is so overwhelming that it affects the individual's whole life, changing his or her behavior and modes of living. And those who have experienced NDEs lose all fear of death. Many consider it a peak experience of their life. (Cranston & Williams, 1984, p. 124)

Cerebral Hypoxia and Cerebral Hypercarbia vs. near-death experiences.

There have been those who claim that near-death experiences are induced by low levels of oxygen or high levels of carbon dioxide in the brain. Such conditions are possible when an individual has been seriously injured. These conditions are known as cerebral hypoxia and cerebral hypercarbia, respectively. The condition arises when the heart stops beating and oxygen flow to the brain stops. At the same time, the buildup of carbon dioxide is not removed from the brain, since circulation has stopped. "Dr. Sabom reports on experiments where the level of oxygen was slowly withdrawn from volunteer subjects. The person's mental and physical abilities became progressively impaired until convulsions occurred and respiration ceased. No experiences resembling an NDE were reported" (Cranston & Williams, 1984, p. 126). Subjects did experience frightening hallucinations, but they did not resemble NDEs. (Cranston & Williams, 1984).

Dr. Raymond Moody in his book, *Reflections on Life after Life*, stated,

I emphasized from the beginning that I have dealt with some near-death experiences in which no apparent clinical death took place, and that these contain many of the same features as those in which there was such a 'death.' Thus all the phenomena alluded to—the noise, the panoramic memory, and the light—have been experienced in the course of near-death encounters in which this cut-off of blood flow to the brain never took place. (Moody, 1977, pp. 109-110)

Thus, it appears that neither a cut-off of oxygen to the brain nor a build-up of carbon dioxide in the brain is a reasonable explanation for an organic cause for NDEs. NDEs continue to occur even when there is a supply of oxygen to the brain.

Hallucinations vs. Near-Death Experiences. There are those who claim that hallucinatory drugs can cause one to experience the near-death experience (Seigel, 1980). This has been frequently used as an argument for associating near-death experiences with physiological causes. If it can be proven that near-death experiences can be reproduced by the use of drugs, there are those who will state that the NDE is strictly a physiological phenomenon. So far, no one has been able to induce an NDE through drugs (Seigel, 1980).

Cranston and Williams (1984) distinguish between a narcotic experience and an NDE. They explain that narcotic hallucinations are associated with either a high of euphoria or the terrifying distorted perceptions of a bad trip. They go on to explain that experiences of NDEs are uniformly associated with a clarity of perception. They state that the NDE

is easily distinguished from a chemically induced hallucination by this clarity of perception and thinking.

According to Morse (Morse & Perry, 1992), a physician who has done research on near-death experiences with his patients, hallucinatory drugs can create a vision similar to an NDE. However, he points out that drug users do not see the transforming light that is commonly seen by those who experience an NDE. Nor do drug users experience the clarity of thought experienced by those during an NDE. He also claims that many of his patients that reported NDEs had no time to make up the stories. His patients spoke of their NDEs immediately upon recovering consciousness from serious traumas (Morse & Perry, 1992).

A condition that should 'wipe clean the content of man's consciousness', according to textbooks on the subject. In these cases, the near-death experience the very least indicates that man has some very exciting and unknown aspects of mental functioning that neuroscience is only beginning to explore. (p.113)

In fact, the use of drugs would more than likely inhibit an individual's ability to recall a vision during their NDE. "Several studies indicate that individuals who had received medication or anesthesia were less likely to recall a near-experience than those who were drug-free" (Bailey & Yates, 1996, p. 226). Drugs would hinder and not encourage NDEs.

Neurological Causes vs. Near-Death Experiences. There are neurologists who argue that near-death experiences are related to instability and activity in the brain's right temporal lobe (Bailey & Yates, 1996). They argue that the

area of the brain above the right ear is “responsible for religious experiences of deep meaningful, early memories, and out-of-body experiences” (Bailey & Yates, 1996, p. 13). Susan Blackmore picks up on his theory and theorizes that the “instability in the temporal lobe, which may show epileptic signs, is responsible for paranormal, mystical, and possibly many NDE elements” (Bailey & Yates, 1996, p. 13). Bailey and Yates (1996) claim that Melvin Morse agrees that the right temporal lobe shows NDE-like activity, but that it is a mediating bridge for a spiritual experience and not a physical cause for the experience. Much like the heart pumps blood but does not create the fluid, the right temporal lobe influences, but does not create the spiritual experience.

Depersonalization was considered one of the early causes of near-death experiences.

Today psychiatric evaluation of near-death experience is the specialty of Russell Noyes, Jr., a professor of psychiatry, and his collaborator, Roy Kletti, a clinical psychologist, at the University of Iowa. Though less dogmatic than Pfister and Hunter, Noyes and Kletti treat near-death experience as a variation of the “depersonalization” syndrome. Since Noyes and Kletti admit that near-death experience has positive as well as pathological aspects, most near-death researchers respect and draw upon their work, even while taking exception to some of their interpretations. (Zalenski, 1987, p. 99)

Noyes and Ketti argue that it is a defense of the nervous system at the time of death. They claim that it “stalls off mental disorganization during the death crisis by presenting an altered passage of time, vivid and accelerated thoughts, a sense of detachment, unreality, automatic movements, and revival of memories” (quoted in Bailey & Yates, 1996, p.12-13).

Bates and Stanley (1985) explain how the near-death experience is strikingly dissimilar to the psychopathology of depersonalization. The main contrast is that the NDE is often extremely vivid to the experiencer as compared to a depersonalization state. During an NDE, individuals usually experience a feeling of overwhelming calm which is not usually present when one undergoes a pathological depersonalization.

Michael Sabom, according to Bailey and Yates (1996), argues that the depersonalization theory promoted by Noyes and Ketti fails to account for all the elements of near-death experiences. They fail to account for individuals leaving their bodies and accurately being able to describe situations going on in the room where they were supposed to have been dead. Nor do they account for the reports of individuals leaving their bodies and traveling to other locations and giving accurate descriptions of conversations between individuals. Nor do they account for the spiritual changes that take place with those who have had an NDE. Their theory, therefore, does not explain away near-death experiences.

There are individuals from a Freudian perspective who try to explain away near-death experiences as “hallucinatory wish fulfillment defending the ego from its impending annihilation” (Bailey & Yates, 1996, p. 14). Again, hallucinations in general do not contain the elements of clarity that are frequently reported by those who experience a near-death experience.

It was not until the middle of this century when spiritual literature began to receive serious attention from western science (Grof, 1994). Grof

feels that one of the important contributors to this re-awakening of the spiritual was the emergence of near-death experiences and their subsequent scientific interest. He supports the perspective that near-death experiences are actual experiences and not hallucinogenic reactions to chemical changes in the brain. He does this by exploring some of the out-of-body experiences reported by experiencers upon their recovery (p. 31, 1994).

He mentions cases of blind individuals able to leave their bodies during their near-death experiences and were able to see their surroundings having left their bodies during the experience. This condition, however, was temporary. For upon returning to their bodies, they were again blind. Grof (1994) goes on to state that such reports are verifiable and thus for him prove that near-death experiences are not merely a chemical reaction within the brain.

It is the ability of the individual to leave his or her body during the near-death experience that may be one of the most convincing aspects that the near-death experience is a phenomenon of great spiritual importance. It allows us to ponder the survival of the soul beyond the physical body. It appears that during this experience, the soul separates from the physical body and continues to experience perceptions of the physical world from a physical perspective different from that of the body from which it came.

Those who support the organic causes of near-death experience are unable to explain the perceptions experienced by those who have claimed to have physically left their bodies. These people have been able to accurately

describe experiences in other locations, which they saw during their experience.

The explanations of scientists bent on proving that near-death experiences are nothing more than an organic reaction to a dying body are limited. Their explanations only work within the self-imposed boundaries of what they define as a near-death experience. Restricting themselves to organic explanations prevents scientists from asking questions, exploring, and finding answers to those mysteries beyond organic explanation.

Categories of near-death experiences

Atwater (1994) has broken near-death experiences down into four categories. She labels the first category as the Initial Experience. This experience she describes as a loving nothingness. She theorizes that those who have had this type of experience are those that need the least amount of shaking up in their lives. This type of experience allows the individual to begin considering reality from a different perspective.

The second category she describes as the Hellish Experience. This is the negative experience mentioned earlier. She feels that those who have this type of experience have deeply repressed guilt, fears, or angers. Those who expect some type of punishment upon their death experience have a tendency to have the negative experience.

The third category that Atwater (1994) recognizes is named the Heavenly Experience. These types of experiences involve encounters with

comforting family members who have passed on and/or the appearance of reassuring religious figures. These experiences are up lifting and are experienced by those who she feels need to know how much they are loved.

The fourth category she calls the Transcendent Experience. During this type of experience, the individual is exposed to otherworldly dimensions. These experiences may also include revelations of greater truths. She considers those who have this type of experience ready for a mind stretching challenge. They are individuals who are able to integrate greater truths into their lives. She goes on to claim that all four of these categories may occur during the same near-death experience.

The Return Experience

According to Dr. Greyson, people sometimes return from an NDE against their will and they may be left feeling angry or depressed (Harris & Bascom, 1990). These people return with a sense of being rejected by the After Life because they felt they did not deserve the experience. They may also feel like they have been manipulated by a higher power leaving them with a sense of anger and then feeling guilty for the anger (Harris & Bascom, 1990).

They may find it difficult to re-enter the problems of physical reality since those problems will seem petty and irrelevant to the newly acquired meaning they see in life. They may tend to want to be by themselves and avoid contact with other people, since they have a fear that no one will

understand them, especially if they are not able to express what they are feeling in words. It is especially difficult for NDEers to express what they felt and experienced, since it is so far removed from our normal experience in day-to-day life. Words do not exist to express it.

For those NDEers who experience a review of their lives, an extra trauma may be added to their re-entry to day-to-day living. Many of them reviewed painful moments in their lives as well as joyful moments. The review of those painful moments could open old, unpleasant feelings long since repressed. Many people who report having had reviews of painful moments express regret in the way they had handled those past experiences. There is the potential for them to dwell on the regrets of the past. This could be another source for depression in the process of re-entry.

Dr. Kubler-Ross (1983) has discovered that it is quite common for people who have experienced an NDE to experience a sensation of physical wholeness and health during the experience. She asserts that

amputees had their legs again, those who were in wheelchairs could dance and move around without effort, and blind people could see. . . . We naturally, checked these acts out by testing patients who had been lined with no light perception for. . . . To our amazement, they were able to describe the color and design of clothing and jewelry the people present wore. (p. 208)

This experience can be a source of frustration for individuals when they return to their confined state in physical reality. Having been freed from their physical confines during the near-death experience, they are now bound again by the restrictions for their physical condition.

Effects on individuals

According to a variety of authors, the near-death experience has a lasting effect on the beliefs and attitudes of those who experience them. Many people, who remember having had a NDE, report a change in their attitude towards life. They claim where they were once selfish or fearful in life, they are now giving and fearless. Often times, people return with a sense of love, respect, and wonderment for nature. Kenneth Ring, a researcher of near-death experiences, delved into the research as a way of lifting himself out of a spiritual depression.

The effect, combined with a certain quality of luminous serenity which many near-death survivors display, made me feel that I myself was undergoing an extended spiritual awakening. In any event, as my interviews continued, I found that I was no longer oppressed by the spiritual deadness that had...provided the initial impetus to my research. In fact, my feeling was becoming just the opposite. (Ring, 1980, p. 17)

In his association with those who had experienced NDEs, Ring himself was affected on a spiritual level by their experience. The effect was a spiritual healing.

People often times lose their fear of death after an NDE. If they were fearful of death before the experience, they are now no longer afraid. However, people generally do not wish to end their lives early to move onto the death experience after they have had an NDE. Many times, they will return with a sense of purpose in their lives or at least the sense that there is some purpose, although they are not sure what that might be.

Children also have been known to have NDEs. Melvin Morse is a pediatrician who has done near-death experience research with his own patients. Morse was impressed by his young patients' experiences with NDEs. Their experiences impressed them so much that they never forgot their experiences (Crabbendan, 1993/1994). Life reviews, however, seem to be experienced only by adults. Children do not experience life reviews (Krier, 1990). However, children do experience many of the other characteristics attributed to NDEs such as feeling peace, separating from the body, meeting with others and seeing a light.

Every single child who mentioned that someone was waiting for them mentioned a person who had actually preceded them in death, even if by only a few moments. And yet none of these children had been informed of the recent death of the relatives by us at any time. (Kubler-Ross, 1983, p. 210)

Morse also witnessed that his patients were changed from having had their near-death experiences (Crabbendan, 1993/1994). He discovered that most of his patients felt that they had been changed for the better because of their experience with near-death. "It was their conviction of having been changed for the better that caught Morse's attention" (Crabbendan, 1993/1994, p.83).

Moody experienced a deep personal change as a result of his encountering others who had experienced near-death experiences.

On a personal level, my experience with past lives has changed my belief system. No longer do I consider these experiences oddities.... At their least, they are deep revelations from the subconscious. At their most, they are evidence of life before life. (Moody & Perry, 1991, p. 190)

Moody explored past life regressions in this book. In the exploration of past lives, it is implied that life continues after death.

Kenneth Ring (1984) describes the NDE as a “seed experience” for individuals. He claims that the experiencer usually matures spiritually after an NDE. However, the rate at which someone matures is left up to many factors dependent upon the individual (Ring, 1984). In many cases, near-death experiencers find that they are no longer as interested in the material world, or at least not in material gain. The desire to experience joy in their lives becomes very important. Often, they find themselves more understanding of other people and more willing to forgive them than before the experience.

NDE researchers report that the people that they are researching tend to exude a sense of unconditional love that may not have been present for them before their experience. “This spiritual core of the NDEer is so awesome and overwhelming that the person who experiences it is at once and forever thrust into an entirely new mode of being” (Ring, 1984, p.50).

Because he believes in free will, and not predestination, it troubles Morse that some NDEer’s have experienced increased psychic talents (Crabbendan, 1993/1994). Some have an increased ability to foretell or sense when someone else is going to die, be in danger, or attempt suicide. He thinks this phenomenon involves the right lobe of the brain, which NDEs are thought to stimulate.

Somehow, there are those who have experience an NDE whose receivers have become more sensitive to vibrations from others than ordinary people (Crabbendan, 1993/1994). He has also noted that those who have experienced an NDE seemed to have a renewed zest for life. "The transformative powers of these experiences in ordinary people's lives continues to impress him most deeply" (Crabbendan, 1993/1994, p. 87). "People who have had near-death experiences are four times more likely to have psychic experiences than those who have not have them" (Morse, 1992, p. 89-91). Most people whom Melvin Morse studied reported an enhanced psychic ability after their near-death experience. "These psychic experiences range from precognitive awareness of incoming telephone calls to verified middle-of-the-night apparitions of faraway loved ones who have just died" (Bailey & Yates, 1996, p. 21).

Near-death experiences remarkably parallel, in general terms, much of what is believed to be the after-life experience (Van Mater, 1993). Van Mater feels understanding NDEs will help us to understand the state of consciousness after death. Almost all who have undergone an NDE feel wiser, with a positive impression that death is beautiful and nothing to fear. Most find that the essence of the experience stays with them, giving a renewed sense of purpose and responsibility, reverence for life, and more sensitivity to others' needs. "The otherworld journey leaves its mark not only in conversation, austerities, and other signs of reform, but also in long lasting physical and emotional effects" (Zalenski, 1987, p. 78). Zalenski continues:

Sabom and Ring indicate that the loss of fear of death lasts longer and goes deeper in survivors who did have blissful visionary experiences. This suggests that while the charm of having escaped death may fade, a recollection of having glimpsed the afterlife can dissolve, perhaps permanently, the whole burden of mortal dread. The visionary, then, has a twofold consolation: having died he knows that death is not painful, and having crossed the threshold he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that life will continue. (p. 143)

Crabbendan (1993/1994) states that patients who awaken from NDEs often experience spiritual inspiration, revelations, or enlightenment. Many of those individuals experienced a change in their attitudes as a result of their NDEs by becoming aware of life's essential spirituality (Crabbendan, 1994, p. 87). Such an experience appears to have a lasting effect on the individual and their relationship to life.

Kellehear (1996) claims that near-death experiences have supplied renewal to religious and spiritual beliefs. While at the same time, "they supply both a simple ethics and an important source of religious hope " (Kellehear, 1996, pp. 94-95). As a result of the near-death experience, many individuals gain a stronger sense of their spiritual faith.

It appears that when an individual experiences a near-death experience the veil of ignorance is lifted.

It is often tragic to see how blatantly a man bungles his own life and the lives of others yet remains totally incapable of seeing how much the whole tragedy originates in himself, and how he continually feeds it and keeps it going. (Jung, 1951/1959, p. 10)

They become aware of how they have bungled their lives. The experience itself leads to personal growth for the individual. The life review that some

experiencers mention appears to inspire a lifting of the veil of ignorance and enlightening individuals into awareness of their actions.

Eissler states:

That the knowledge or the vague feeling and that the end is approaching may enable some persons to step aside, so to speak, and view themselves and significant sectors of their lives with humility and also with insights into the futility of so much that is taken too seriously so long as the world is near and man is passionately living in it. (1955, p. 53)

This may be the resulting effect from an NDE as well. The NDE gives the individual the chance to step back from his or her life and view it with a sense of detachment that can allow for the insights that Eissler speaks of. He goes on to say:

The full awareness of each step that leads closer to death, the unconscious experience of one's own death up to the last second which permits awareness and consciousness, would be the crowning triumph of an individually lived life. It would be taken as the only way men ought to die if individuality were really accepted as the only adequate form of living and if life in all its manifestations were integrated, which would of course include death and the sorrows of the terminal pathway. (p. 54)

The near-death experience may be the culminating experience for these people and then they have the opportunity to continue with their lives. The near-death experience may result in bringing greater wisdom into individuals' lives. Enriched from their experience, they are able use the information they have learned from their near-death experience for the rest of their lives. Eissler (1955) claims that the experience of our own death can be a crowning achievement in life. Those who have experienced an NDE may be able to integrate this crowning achievement into their own lives and use it

to enrich themselves and those with whom they have contact. “Similar, neither the general religious belief system of the individual nor specific prior knowledge of similar experiences appears to have any demonstrable bearing on the content of near-death experience, also beliefs are often subsequently influenced by the experience” (Bailey & Yates, 1996, p. 226).

Suicide

According to Moody, people who “returned” from an NDE after attempting a suicide had definite feelings about not attempting suicide again. “All mentioned that after their experiences, they would never consider trying suicide again. Their common attitude is that they had made a mistake, and that they were very glad they had not succeeded in their attempts” (Moody, 1977, p. 175). He reports that some individuals have reported a sense that if one committed suicide, the difficulties that they faced here would be found on the other side as well. There is no escaping personal issues through suicide (Moody, 1977).

Those people who try to commit suicide before they experience an NDE are less likely to attempt again after the experience. According to Bruce Greyson, MD, Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Connecticut Medical School, a major reason for this could be that those who experience an NDE feel themselves as a part of nature now. They gain some insight into a sense of “cosmic unity.” With the increase in their spirituality and loss of concern for the material world, these people might perceive their

problems as less important after the experience (Harris & Bascom, 1990).

Eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant stated:

As soon as we examine suicide from the standpoint of religion we immediately see it in its true light. We have been placed in this world under certain conditions and for specific purposes. But a suicide opposes the purpose of his creator; he arrives in the other world as one who has deserted his post; he must be look upon as a rebel against God.... God is our owner; we are his property; his providence works for our good. (Kant, 1963, pp. 153-154).

The matter of suicide is a complex one in regard to NDEs. There are many reasons for one to do so and a pat answer may not be given to cover all instances. However, it is evident from the research that intentionally taking one's life is much less likely after having had an NDE. People return with a belief that they need to take care of business in their present lives and that death is not an escape from personal responsibility (Moody, 1977).

In his survey of popular and occultist lore, concerning out of body travel, Benjamin Walker notes the common belief that the soul ventures abroad even during sleep and must be awakened gently to avoid disturbing its proper connection to the body. The literature of 'astral projection' is full of warnings about the violent shock of sudden return to the body. (Walker, 1974, pp. 76-77)

The idea that there is a separation between the soul and body is essential for the belief in near-death experiences. The near-death experience is an experience of the soul leaving the body and continuing apart from it.

There is no reason to question the mental health or psychological state of any group of individuals simply on the basis of their having reported near-death experiences, be it pleasant or distressing. Experiences occurring in the course of an attempted suicide raise further questions about the mental state of the individual and its contribution to his or her experience. However, suicide encounters have reported radiant as well as distressing experiences, leading us to question the reliability of

prior mental status as a determinant of experience type. (Bailey & Yates, 1996, p. 225)

Since suicide attempts encounter both radiant and distressing experiences, the essential factor here is not punishment for having attempted suicide. The essential factor appears to be that the experience exists at all. Individuals who attempt suicide, therefore, appear to be as likely to experience the NDEs as those who come close to death from more "natural" causes.

Quotes of Near-Death Experiences from Famous Individuals

In Hemingway's book, *A Farewell to Arms*, he describes the experience of Frederick Henry, the main character, as a near-death experience similar to the one he himself experienced during World War I in Italy when he was wounded by shrapnel.

I ate the end of my piece of cheese and took a swallow of wine. Through the other noise I heard a cough, then came the chuh-chuh-chuh-chuh--then there was a flash, as when a blast furnace door is swung open, and a roar that started white and went red and on and on in a rushing wind. I tried to breathe but my breath would not come and I felt myself rush bodily out of myself and out and out and out and all the time bodily in the wind. I went out swiftly, all of myself, and I knew I was dead and that it had all been a mistake to think you just died. Then I floated, and instead of going on I felt myself slide back. I breathed and I was that. (1929, p. 54)

Stonewall Jackson, who was in a coma for some days due to painful gangrene, awakened out of his coma and said, "Let us cross over the river, and rest in the shade of those trees" (Carrington, 1957, p. 40).

Thomas Edison, also awakening out of a coma, said: "It is very beautiful over there." Goethe's last words were: "Light, more light!" Beethoven, who was

deaf, said: "I shall hear" (Carrington, 1957, p. 40). Von Franz (1987)

describes Jung's experience with an NDE:

In his visions on the brink of death, Jung describes a similar change in his everyday ego: I had the feeling that everything was being sloughed away; everything I aimed at or wished for or thought, the whole phantasmagoria of earthly existence, fell away or was stripped from me—an extremely painful process. Nevertheless something remained; it was as if I now carried along with me everything I had ever experienced or done, everything that had happened around me. I might also say: it was with me, and I was it. I consisted of all that, so to speak. I consisted of my own history, and I felt with great certainty: this is what I am. (p. 108)

Spiritual Crisis

People who experience an NDE are generally not afraid of the experience; however, they sometimes have a difficult time readjusting to their return to physical reality. For many people, a spiritual crisis takes place after the NDE (Peay, 1991). This can be particularly difficult for those who never had an interest in spiritual issues before. They are often left feeling confused about the experience. There is usually no one for them to turn to who can understand with empathy what their experience has been. Consequently, these people tend to not talk about their experience. They are usually fearful that no one will believe them and that they may be labeled delusional. Nor do they want their experience trivialized by those who do not believe.

Because of the sweeping changes of attitude and belief that sometimes take place for the NDEer, it is often difficult for relatives and friends to adjust. The most serious problems that take place for the experiencer do not result from the experience itself, but from the reactions of

friends and relatives. There are two general ways people tend to respond to experiences when they have revealed their secret. Either listeners do not believe what is being told and think that the experiencers are fabricating the story from a hallucination or for personal gain, or they put the experiencers up on a pedestal and have unrealistic expectations of them. When these expectations are not met, the experiencer may have to deal with their scorn and rejection. NDEers tend to not talk about their experiences with many people. They have good reason not to, since they are either not believed, or they are given unrealistic expectations that they can not possibly live up to.

People who experience near-death experiences often claim to be aware of the spiritual quality of what they have just experienced, but they are confused with what they are to do with the information. This conflict can be quite disconcerting, especially for those who were not prepared for spiritual growth to begin with (Peay, 1991). Such changes can be disturbing to the experiencer's interpersonal relationships as well.

Negative Experiences

Not all experiences have been reported as positive. A very small number of experiences have been reported as hellish. One percent of those people who report NDEs actually claim to have experienced a hellish one (Gallup, 1982). Individuals who have reported hellish experiences report that they were filled with terror, panic, and loneliness during the experience. Bailey and Yates (1996) report on three types of negative experiences: (a)

phenomenology similar to peaceful near-death experiences interpreted as unpleasant, (b) a sense of internal void, or (c) graphic hellish landscapes and entities (Bailey & Yates, 1996).

As far as negative near-death experiences are concerned, “little is known about them, and there is in fact no excepted definition of what constitutes a distressing near-death experience” (Bailey & Yates, 1996, p. 209). Moody (1977) states that “in the mass of material I have collected no one has ever described to me a state like an archetypal hell” (p.169). Kenneth Ring (1984) suggested that only about 1% of cases reported unpleasant experiences. However, he goes on to state that NDEs may cause the experiencers some moments of confusion and uncertainty, although he has never encountered a near-death experience that was totally negative. Sabom (1982) encountered more cases of negative experiences, with 18% of people reporting a near-death experience claiming some form of negative experience during the encounter. However, he states that those feelings are transitory and are eventually replaced with positive experiences of feeling at peace as the experience continued.

Lindley, Bryan, and Conley (1981) found it “common” for distressing element to follow a peaceful experience. They suggested that during the transition between a peaceful experience and normal consciousness many people experience panic or anger when returning to present reality. From their descriptions of and direct quotes from near-death accounts, they seem to have included as negative those cases in which the actual experience was

completely peaceful but anger or panic accompanied the apparent return to the body.

Unpleasant Psychological after-effects

As a result of having had a near-death experience, individuals are often left with ongoing psychological aftereffects. Bailey has

found a number of typical psychological aftereffects, including: altered energy levels, hypersensitivity to light and sound, unusual sensitivity to chemicals (especially pharmaceuticals), reduced stress, lowered blood pressure, and even electrical sensitivity. This last effect makes a person's energy field affect electrical and electronic devices; many can no longer wear watches because they break, or microphones fight them. (Bailey & Yates, 1996, p. 242)

Transformation of an individual after a near-death experience tends to be a common experience. Leaving the body has been a hallmark of transformation for shamen, healers, and others throughout the centuries. "The near-death medieval narratives. . . correspond to what historian Peter Dinzelbacher calls the first phase of medieval Christian vision literature (lasting until the mid-thirteenth century) in which the visionary travels out of his or her body to visit heaven, hell and purgatory, and returns to life transformed" (Zaleski, 1987, p. 6). It is appropriate, therefore, that those who have experienced near-death experiences should also be transformed. These transformations may be both positive and/or negative.

St. Theresa of Avila in the 16th century had a mystical encounter that strongly resembled a near-death experience. She wrote about her experience in a book called *The Autobiography of Theresa of Jesus*. It was

during the time of the Spanish Inquisition and there was great danger in her writing down her account. However, the experience was so profound for her that she faced her fear and went through with her writing. Her mystical experiences were similar to near-death experiences:

Turning now to this sudden transport of the spirit it may be said . . . that the soul really seems to have left the body; on the other hand it is clear that the person is not dead . . . He feels as if he has been in another world, very different from this in which we live, and has been shown a fresh light there, so much unlike any to be found in this life long, it would have been impossible for him to obtain any idea of them. In a single instance he is taught so many things all at once, that, if he were to labor for years on end trying to fit them all into his imagination and thought, he could not succeed with a thousandth part of them. This . . . is seen with the eyes of the soul very much more clearly than we can see things with the eyes of the body; and some of the revelations are communicated to it (the soul) without words. (St. Theresa, Trans. 1961, p.160)

St. Theresa came to understand the isolating aspects of having had a mystical experience such as those who have had near-death experiences. Fundamentalist Christians of the time persecuted her as being possessed with the devil. For her and for many others it can be a lonely experience. In the depth of her aloneness with the experience, she said, "I needed someone who had gone through it all for such a person alone could understand me and interpret my experience" (St. Theresa, Trans. 1960, p. 277).

Individuals who are unprepared to face an NDE may doubt their own mental stability. They may be afraid to discuss the NDE with friends or professionals out of fear of being rejected, ridiculed, or regarded as psychotic. Rejection of the experience by a professional may further alienate

the NDEer and prevent him or her from seeking help in understanding and integrating the experience.

As many NDEers gradually adapt on their own to the experience and its effects, their changing values, attitudes, and interests strain relationships with family and friends who find it difficult to understand or adapt to the NDEers' new beliefs and behavior. On the one hand, some experiencers find themselves ostracized from their families and friends, facing the fears of their significant others that they have come under the influence of evil forces, or that they have somehow become bewitched. On the other hand, media publicity about positive transformations following NDEs may also lead experiencers' families and friends to place the NDEer on a pedestal and to expect unrealistic changes, to expect oracular or healing powers and superhuman patience and forgiveness. They are then disappointed and rejecting when the experiencer is unable to live up to his or her assigned new role as a living saint.

Christian fundamentalists have their own explanation for NDEs and the individuals who experience them.

It is interesting that in turning to Corinthians 11:14-15 we read that 'Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light while his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness.' The being of light and the other people seen in these paranormal experiences could indeed be Satan and his fellow demons who are working to perpetrate a spiritual hoax on those who are near death and on the living who hear these reports. (Anderson, 1980, p. 122)

Such points of view are common among religious conservatives. They acknowledge that the NDE takes place; however, they assign it to a realm of

evil. Thus, they encourage fear of the experience. By doing so, they effectively remove discussions of NDEs out of their general congregation.

Greyson and Harris (1987) have noted several problems encountered by those who have experienced an NDE. He cites anger, depression, and difficulty accepting their return as issues individuals experience as a result of an NDE. Other individuals have difficulty reconciling their religious beliefs with the NDE experience. He also states that there are some who over identify with the experience and that there are others who view the experienced as a possible symptom of having mental instability.

Greyson and Harris also note interpersonal difficulties that are brought about as a result of having had the experience. They include

a pervasive fear of ridicule or rejection from others; difficulty in integrating attitude changes with the expectations of family and friends; inability to communicate to others the meaning and impact of the NDE; difficulty in maintaining customary life roles that no longer have the same significance after the experience; and accepting the limitations and deficits of human relationships in lieu of unconditional relationships and feelings experienced during the NDE. (1987, pp. 42-43)

Greyson and Harris (1987) acknowledge that individuals who have experienced a negative NDE are likely to experience trauma after the event. They also state that there are individuals who experience continuing anger or depression as a result of being revived from the near death state. It is therefore important that individuals who have experienced trauma from an NDE seek counseling from a therapist who is willing to assist them in integrating the experience. They should avoid anyone who would judge the

experience as a form of attention seeking behavior or delusional thinking.

Such diagnosis would only serve to exacerbate that traumatic condition the individual is already experiencing.

The response of a counselor, therapist, or health professional to an NDEr may influence critically whether the NDE can be integrated and used as a stimulus for personal growth, or whether it is hidden away-but not forgotten-as a bizarre event that clashes with the individual's everyday life and may be regarded as a sign of mental instability. (Greyson & Harris, 1987, pp. 42-43)

Near-Death Experience as Rite of Initiation

A ritual is intended to be transformative for the individual. "[Ritual] is a transformative self-immolation of order as presently constituted, even sometimes a voluntary *sparagmos* or self-dismemberment of order, in the subjunctive depths of liminality" (Turner, 1982, p. 83). Folk communities would view rituals as transformative for the individual because in some way during the ritual the individual was changed through contact with the divine or magic. "We also find rituals taking shape in conformity with a general sense of what is right and fitting to do in the context of a given situation" (Grimes, 1987, p. 408). Therefore, magic is not always the component for change in regards to ritual; it may just be the status of the individual changes in the eyes of others, which causes the change. "Performances of ritual are distinctive phases in the social process, whereby groups and individuals adjust to internal changes and adapt to their external environment" (Turner, 1987, p. 158).

Transformative change is no longer recognized in our secular society as having come from contact with the divine. Rather, change is recognized as having come from the sanction and recognition of the government. The divine has touched those who have encountered a near-death experience. They, however, are not officially recognized as having been changed in any way in this society. Upon their return, they have difficulty reintegrating into the society. There is no place given for the experiences they have just been through. However, the experience itself may contain place for the individuals. It is an individual and spiritual experience, and therefore place is given individually by each experimenter in a personal spiritual way.

The near-death experience itself may then be viewed as an archetypal rite of passage into awareness of their oneness with everything, or godliness. As a result of their experience, the individual is transformed and renewed. Evidence for this is found in the observable emotional changes that take place for the individual after the experience.

Three Stages of the Near-Death Experience

Broken down into three stages, the near-death experience begins to resemble a rite of transition. It appears to be a process of initiation from a state of limited awareness into awareness of oneness with everything, or Godliness. If it is indeed an archetypal experience, then the NDE may be an interrupted initiation of the soul into life beyond physical reality. This may be an opportunity to glimpse into what occurs at the moment of our deaths. The

word “interrupted” is used because research so far can only be conducted on those who return from the experience. The initiation into the Otherworld, from this perspective, appears to be incomplete; the initiate returns. However, changes of self-perception do occur for individuals in a personal way, and in this regard, the initiation may be complete.

As a rite of passage, passing from physical reality into the nonphysical world, the NDE provides individuals with the experience of an in-between state of existence. They are in what might be considered a both/and state rather than an either/or state, for they are existing in both a physical and nonphysical state while they are in the in-between state of an NDE. All of the components necessary for a rite of passage, as defined by Van Gennep, appear to be present for those who experience an NDE.

According to Van Gennep, there are three phases in a rite of transition: separation, transition, and incorporation (cited in Turner, 1982, p. 24). These three phases mark distinct periods of change for an individual going through a rite of transition. Upon the completion of these three stages, the initiate receives a new status.

All three of these phases may be observed in an NDE. Each of these three phases marks a distinct stage of change for an individual going through a rite of transition. As an archetypal experience, the NDE involves a triad. Three is an archetypal number of completion. It is fitting that upon the completion of life in physical reality, the number three would appear. “Three can be regarded as a relative totality, since it usually represents either a

spiritual totality that is a product of thought, like the Trinity” (Jung, 1951/1959, p. 224).

The First Stage. The first phase is recognized as the stage of separation. During this phase, the initiate is separated from his or her usual surroundings as a symbolic means of breaking them from the past. "It includes symbolic behavior ... which represents the detachment of the ritual subjects (novices, candidates, neophytes or 'initiands') from their previous social statuses" (Turner, 1982, p. 24). This phase comprises "symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions" (Mahdi, Foster , & Little, 1987, p. 5).

During the classic near-death experience, this phase is recognized by the separation of the individual from his or her body. The individual reports physically detaching from his or her body and having the sense of viewing the body from a different vantage point outside of the self. This is followed by an experience of emotional detachment from the physical body and physical world as well. The individual directs attention away from the immediate physical reality, while at the same time, the individual's apparent death has literally separated him or her from the living.

The Second Stage. The second phase of a rite of passage is called the liminal or transition stage. During the liminal stage, "the ritual subjects pass

through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few ... of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states" (Turner, 1982, p. 24). The liminal state is one of being in-between statuses. During this stage, initiates lose their place in society. By losing their place, their status drops lower than it was before they began the rite of transition.

A part of the process of the liminal stage is a call to sacrifice. "Sacrifice consists above all in actively re-centering the self and its entire world and renouncing personal autonomy" (Grimes, 1987, p. 418). In the process of leaving the body and going into the light, the physical body is being sacrificed and the individual re-focused into a different reality. A state of ambiguity is created. The subject's are both physical and nonphysical at the same time. They are in between the physical and nonphysical worlds. By entering the light, they have entered the second stage of a rite of passage, the liminal stage.

Robert Moore has stated that "liminal space requires ritual leadership... . A ritual leader... must be present for liminal space to exist" (1984, p. 136). The ritual leader during the NDE may be recognized as the being of light, which appears during the experience. The being of light is the ritual leader during the NDE. This leader greets the individual and guides him or her through the life review experience. The leader's presence maintains an atmosphere of purpose and his or her questions appear to guide the individual down an intentional path.

Some Christians interpret the being of light observed during an NDE as a Christ figure. From a Jungian perspective, Christ exemplifies the archetypal Self (Jung, 1951/1959, p. 37). This being, therefore, may represent an archetypal symbol of the Self during the near-death experience.

The being of light is often accompanied by a feeling of oneness with life. It may be a moment in which an individual's sense of Godness is encountered. Jung also speaks of the Christ figure as a symbol of wholeness or oneness. "There is an ever-present archetype of wholeness which may easily disappear from the purview of consciousness or may never be perceived at all until a consciousness illuminated by conversion recognizes it in the figure of Christ" (Jung, 1951/1959, p. 40).

During the NDE, a sense of spiritual awareness is ignited within individuals. Their faith in life is restored. They lose their fear of death. The experience tends to be rewarding and their experience in life is enhanced. In regards to the liminal state, Turner states that "if the experiences of the participants have been rewarding ... faith in the cosmic and moral orders contained in the myth cycle will obviously be reinforced" (1987, pp. 165-166). All of these components are present in the NDE; faith in the cosmic appears to be restored.

During this second stage of a rite of passage, "There is an ecstatic state and a sense of union, belief in ritual, prolonged meditation, where culturally transmitted techniques and intense personal discipline sustain the peak experience" (Turner, 1987, p. 166). Many of those who have had an

NDE refer to their experience as a peak experience in their lives. They have a sense of ecstasy during the NDE. All of these parallel the contents of the liminal state of a rite of passage.

During the state of in-between, the initiate experiences ordeals that are intended to prevent a sense of inflated self. The life review that is experienced during an NDE in this stage may fulfill that purpose. During the life review, individuals may view situations they were involved of which they are not proud. This can have a humbling effect on the individual. "The initiatory experience itself may be partial or flawed, but even this has the psychological advantage of preventing psychic inflation in the initiate" (Mahdi, Foster, & Little, 1987, p. 333).

The Third Stage. In the third and final stage of a rite of passage, the initiate is reintegrated back into society with new insights and new status. The signal that the initiate is ready to enter the third and final stage is often heralded by their having a powerful dream. The dream often involves a power animal that assists them on their journey. Aside from being the ritual leader, the light being may also represent the power animal and the NDE itself could represent the great dream.

Initiatory death is always followed by resurrection, and resolution of the shaman's crisis. Shamans are equally at home in "objective reality" and the various regions of the supernatural world. They become healers, seers and priests, and accompany the souls of the dead during their journey to the other world. (Grof, 1994, p.22)

After the dream, the initiate returns to society with new insight and new status and is re-integrated. In the traditional view, the initiate has contact with the divine that causes a transformation. However, we live in a secular society. The divine law created by gods has been replaced with secular law created by governments.

What is missing for those who experience an NDE is the societal recognition of a new status. Although the community at large does not recognize the new status of the individual, the individual is oftentimes fully aware of a new status and relationship to life. Awareness of immortality and a connection to all life brings the individual a new relationship to the world and the awareness brings a new sense of place with life.

Such awareness can have far-reaching effects on the individual, especially if it is contrary to former beliefs. Often this new awareness is described as more than a belief. It is a new knowledge concerning personal identity. When a rite of passage is completed, the identity of the individual has changed. When a near-death experience is complete, the identity of the individual has changed as well. The NDE contains all of the components of a rite of transition with the final result being an individual who has been changed and brought into a circle of loving feelings for the world.

Archetypal Images

Other archetypal images are present in the near-death experience. The life review experienced during the NDE is a meeting with one's self. The

history of the individual is played before his or her eyes in such a manner that the past becomes perfectly clear (Moody, 1975). In the process, the individual learns how his or her actions affected others and how it led to personal development. The individual examines all conscious and shadow material. Here, the individual experiences aspects of the self to which he or she has been closed off. In order to truly know the self, one must know the shadow material as well.

The necessary and needful reaction from the collective unconscious expresses itself in archetypally formed ideas. The meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one's own shadow... one must learn to know oneself in order to know who one is. (Jung, 1943/1969, p. 21)

The life review gives the individual just that experience.

The life review also presents the shadow material. Knowing their shadow helps individuals gain a sense of completion, in that they feel a greater sense of integration with the whole self. The life review allows them to know who they are in the world, as well, with all of their failures and successes, high points and low.

Carl Jung's world of the shadow is represented in the life review. The floating experience that some have during the NDE may be an archetypal expression of the boundlessness of the soul. For Jung, the world of the shadow is

the world of water, where all life floats in suspension; where the realm of the sympathetic system, the soul of everything living, begins; where I am indivisibly this and that; where I experience the other in myself and the other-than-myself experiences me. (Jung, 1943/1969, p. 21)

The shadow is a place where life floats in suspension. During life review, the NDE individuals' lives float in suspension as well. They are themselves and they are not themselves. They are neither here nor there and are both here and there.

“The sea is the favorite symbol for the unconscious, the mother of all that lives” (Jung, 1943/1969, p. 178). Why the sea? As Jung points out, floating within the sea does not allow an individual to know up from down. It is directionless. It surrounds the individual. During the NDE, the individual experiences himself floating in a sea of space. Like floating in the sea, he finds himself no longer confined by gravity but is weightless. Jung draws an association between the sea and the unconscious.

The NDE can represent an archetypal form of a second birth. “The idea of a second birth is found at all times and in all places. In the earliest beginnings of medicine it was a magical means of healing; in many religions it is the central mystical experience” (Jung, 1943/1969, p.45).

“We must therefore assume that they [fantasies] correspond to certain collective (and not personal) structural elements of the human psyche in general, and, like the morphological elements of the human body, they are inherited” (Jung, 1943/1969, p. 155). Here, Jung discusses both the personal and impersonal types of fantasies. As he discusses the interpersonal fantasy, he states that the fantasy cannot originate within the individual, but rather outside of the individual in the collective consciousness. Thus, near-death experience may indeed be something from the collective unconscious

expressed in the archetypal form that is presented to the individual near death.

Jung (1943/1969, p. 155) mentions that fantasy products of the collective unconscious arise when the intensity of consciousness is reduced. It would make sense that the near-death experience would arise at a time when the consciousness was reduced, and that time being near the moment of death for an individual. The near-death experience can clearly be viewed as an experience directed from the collective unconscious and not arising out of the individual's expectations or past experiences. Clearly, it has been shown that many people experience near-death experiences without ever having heard of them. It is reasonable to state then that the near-death experience holds an archetypal quality that comes out of the collective unconsciousness of humankind.

The experience of the light during the NDE may be symbolic of the consciousness returning to union with the unconsciousness. "And God said: 'Let there be light!' is the projection of that immemorial experience of the separation of the conscious from the unconscious" (Jung, 1943/1969, p.167). The light before the individual may be the light of consciousness and awareness. Individuals speak of a feeling of complete awareness when they are in the presence of the light.

Jung states that it is the separation of the consciousness from the unconsciousness that allows us to view them separately. In order to experience self, one must experience an other. Relativity allows us to

experience ourselves apart from another. In view of this perceptive, then, darkness can only be experienced in the presence of light, and light can only be experienced in the presence of darkness. Therefore, if the light is the separation of consciousness from unconsciousness, then consciousness can only be experienced in the presence of unconsciousness.

The presence of the light, the All-That-Isness, might then be the catalyst that allows the individual to experience a state of selfhood at the moment of death. The sense of self is clarified by reflecting off the "All That Is." "If a person has a paranormal experience such as leaving their body but is not accompanied by the light, then the experience is not usually transformative...the transformative powers are in the light" (Morse, 1992, pp. 162-163).

Paradoxically enough, in coming close to the Self there emanates from it an attraction to it and, at the same time, a fear of it. The fear of death is thereby in the last analysis a fear of the Self and of the final inner confrontation with the self. (Von Franz, 1987, p. 60)

According to Von Franz, the being of light may be a personification of the whole, healed self.

In many accounts the survivor relates his entire experience from the ego point of view, that of an ego which seems to be equivalent to the normal ego of everyday life. This everyday ego is then confronted with a 'voice' or with an 'inner friend,' who in Jungian psychology would be interpreted as a personification of the Self. (Von Franz, 1987, p. 107)

The being of light, which may hold the image of the personification of the Self, may also hold the archetypal image of the hermaphrodite. Often times, the being in the NDE is viewed as sexually indistinguishable from male

and female. Jung notes that “notwithstanding its monstrosity, the hermaphrodite has gradually turned into a subduer of conflicts and a bringer of healing, and it acquired this meaning in relatively early phases of civilization” (Jung, 1943/1969, p. 174).

The being of light contains the hermaphroditic qualities that Jung mentions. It is considered both sexless and a bringer of healing. When an individual is experiencing an NDE, she is experiencing a union of the opposites: life and death; consciousness and unconsciousness; light and dark.

It is fitting then that the hermaphrodite should appear during the NDE as a symbol of the creative union of opposites. “The bisexual primordial being turns into a symbol of the unity of personality, a symbol of the self, where the war of opposites finds peace” (Jung, 1943/1969, p. 175). It is in the presence of the light being that so many experiencers said that they found peace and a sense of wholeness with life. During the NDE, the hermaphrodite becomes the archetypal symbol of that wholeness. It may also be the symbol for the individual’s eventual healing from the physical threat that triggered the NDE.

Chapter 2:

Method: A Phenomenological Study

Overview

As illustrated in Chapter 1, near-death experiences are personal and unique to each individual who has gone through the experience. Research may be accomplished around general common themes. However, due to the subjective nature of the material discussed within this dissertation, a phenomenological approach was chosen to examine the data.

The method chosen for the analysis will have an effect on the outcome of the research. We explore data through our own lenses of knowing, and the method we choose for the obtaining of the data heavily influences our way of knowing the experience. Our method, therefore, affects the information that is available to us. The method applied sets the stage for the experience received from the research. Likewise, the experience we have affects the research information available to us through the lens of our knowing and we ourselves are affected by the information we receive.

By having a method, we are able to place boundaries around the research. Consequently, the boundary will reduce the anxiety created by this topic. By placing a boundary around the research through a method, we are placing limitations on the research and therefore placing limits on the information we receive as well.

As a result, any method chosen to explore near-death experiences confronts us with its limitations, strengths, and assumptions. Any research study of any topic is also thus flawed, acknowledged or not. In turn, this will affect our way of knowing the topic, and this will affect our way of relating to it. Consequently, we are affected and changed in relationship to the topic by the method we choose.

Phenomenological Research Aims

This study of near-death experiences utilizes a phenomenological methodology that employs qualitative research tools. "Phenomenology is the study of phenomena, or things or events in the everyday world.

Phenomenologists study situations in the everyday world from the viewpoint of the experiencing person" (Becker, 1992, p. 7). In order to achieve an understanding of the experience of an NDE, we must spend some time with it, get to know it, and listen to it. Using phenomenology, we enter a process of "understanding on a personal level the motives and beliefs behind the people's actions" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 2).

The roots of psychological phenomenology had their beginnings in phenomenological philosophy, which began around 1900. Psychological phenomenology has had a very brief history and according to Giorgi (1985), it has yet to break away from philosophical phenomenology. He states that "phenomenology is understood primarily as a philosophy... which has

implication for psychology rather than actually developing into a phenomenological psychology” (p. 5).

As a result of this perspective on phenomenological psychology, the development of research methods has been geared more toward quantitative methods of study. Currently, there are no universally accepted models for doing phenomenological research (Giorgi, 1985). As with all research tools, a history of research has to be built up, developed, and tested over time before they become accepted as recognized methods of doing research. It is my intention that my work contributes to this body of information on phenomenological research leading towards its general acceptance.

Phenomenological research is research into the lived experience of that which is being studied. It is a description of the lived experience. “To do justice to the lived aspects of human phenomena . . . one first has to know how someone actually experienced what has been lived” (Giorgi, 1985, p. 1).

Giorgi (1985) points out to critics of phenomenological research that research science is filled with descriptions. One need only look no farther than the early volumes of the *American Journal of Psychology* to see descriptive examples of scientific discussions (Giorgi, 1985, p. 2). Consequently, the results of descriptive research have long been accepted in the field of psychology as legitimately enhancing our experience and information.

It is only when phenomenological research is named and legitimized that those who prefer a strict qualitative model for research oppose its

legitimacy. They do not feel that the method of phenomenological research is scientific. However, at this time, we have no better way of exploring and understanding the meanings of streams of consciousness (Giorgi, 1985).

Phenomenological research is particularly appropriate for psychological research, especially when what takes place in the therapy room is made up mostly of a descriptive nature. To understand the world of our patients, we get them to describe their experiences. "Descriptions have pervaded and continue to pervade, psychology" (Giorgi, 1985, p.3).

Qualitative methodology is the method used in a phenomenological study and is the method chosen for this research. Data for this research will be gained from subjects' descriptions of their own experience. Through the interview, the researcher will gain information surrounding near-death experiences that may reveal archetypal patterns of a rite of passage. A particular strength of the interviewing process is that it allows for large quantities of data to be gathered quickly.

The purpose of the interview is to explore the subjects' experience in as much depth as possible. The researcher wants to gain detailed information surrounding the subject's personal perspectives, experiences, and relationship to their near-death experience. "Phenomenologists study people's experience of everyday life within a definite philosophical context that generates specific assumptions about human nature and human living" (Becker, 1992, p. 9).

In order to achieve the level of depth expected from qualitative research, it is important that the researcher's biases about the subject are not brought into the interview process. It is assumed that when using qualitative research "the participant's perspective on the social phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 82). Qualitative study is a metaphorical approach to understanding another's point of view or experience. Becker quotes Romanyshyn in stating, "A metaphor, then is not essentially a way of seeing how one reality is like another. It is a way of seeing one reality through another" (Becker, 1992, p. 20).

Qualitative research is inductive. Researchers develop concepts, insights, and understandings from patterns in the data, a disruption in the way we have viewed the topic is created, and it causes us to be aware of what we are swimming in. In other words, we become aware of those issues about the topic that we were once unaware of by allowing ourselves to view them from a different perspective. Our relationship to the topic is now changed. It continues to change with each piece of new information we receive. Therefore, we become aware that we are swimming in a metaphor. "Phenomenology takes us to metaphoric consciousness. It is a way of knowing and being" (Romanyshyn, 1995, May).

In alchemy, the researcher is changed by his work. This is true for phenomenological research as well. The researcher works on the topic as much as the topic works on the researcher. There is change for both the

researcher and the topic as knowledge and understanding are revealed to both participants during the process. "We are the agent for what might otherwise be invisible. We give voice to what might otherwise be silent" (Romanyshyn, 1995).

The same can be said for qualitative study. As we move the work through our research, we ourselves are moved by the work. Questions of importance will come to the researcher through the process of being changed by the material. The process allows the researcher to gain a greater intimate understanding of the near-death experience.

Over the past 500 years, research has endeavored to remain objective concerning its subjects. This objectivity has been perceived as a way to keep the knower from contaminating that which is desired to be known. However, by adopting this perspective, the researcher is removing that which is to be studied from the complexes of its environment, causing it to change despite their efforts to not contaminate it. The researcher is unaware of how he or she has affected the outcome of their results by isolating their subject.

A strength of qualitative research is that its subjects are studied within their natural surroundings. By allowing them to remain within a more naturalistic setting (as opposed to a laboratory setting), the results are less likely to be affected by artificial isolation. Instead of separating individuals from their everyday setting for the study, phenomenology studies individuals within their environment. "A phenomenologically grounded theory of science is more faithful to the total phenomenon" (Giorgi, 1985, p. 37).

It is appropriate to use qualitative research for the study of near-death experiences, for they are better understood within the context of other thoughts, feelings, experiences, and beliefs of the subject. To separate out their components for individual study in qualitative research would be to lose the essence of what a near-death experience is. It is spoken in the context of their experience that the components have meaning.

But near-death experiences appear to be a cluster of events so that that one cannot understand the total by looking at its various parts. One cannot understand music by studying the various frequencies of sound that generate each note, nor does one need to have a deep understanding of acoustical physics to enjoy Mozart. The near-death experience remains a mystery. (Morse & Perry, 1990, p. 193)

Becker (1992) has pointed out that phenomenologically oriented researchers study phenomena as they are experienced by people within their own worlds. Their empirical studies highlight events from inside their own context. According to William F. Fischer, "in adopting a phenomenological mode of doing research, a psychologist seeks to reawaken, to thematize and to eidetically understand the phenomena of everyday life as they are actually lived and experienced" (1974, p. 405). In my study, I explore the stories of eight individuals who have experienced a near-death experience.

The qualitative approach thus allows me to explore the effects of the near-death experience upon individuals in their daily lives. I am therefore able to explore changes of perception attributable to the near-death experience that might otherwise be unquantifiable. For this reason, the qualitative researcher must rely on validity for the results. "It is not possible

to achieve perfect reliability if we are to produce valid studies of the real world" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 7).

By observing subjects in their natural environment, the qualitative researcher, it is assumed, is well aware of the transference that may be taking place with the subject. This self-awareness is a strength over quantitative research, which does not acknowledge a transference as possibly contaminating results. This awareness is helpful to the qualitative researcher for acknowledging and accounting for any transference issues that could contaminate their work.

Another assumption is that qualitative researchers are complex knowers. As complex knowers, they are asked to steep and blend with the material. They are asked to be patient knowers, spending time with the subject and understanding it from its own perspective and place in life. By spending time with the topic of NDEs, the researchers "eat the text just as the text eats at [them] with its insistent gnawing... . The image of eating the text which also eats at [them] also indicates how this way of reading is a slowing down by taking in and chewing over ruminating the text" (Romanyshyn, 1991, p. 20). Qualitative research uses an inductive style of knowing where the knowledge comes slowly as an awakening or a gradual understanding. Through the using qualitative research, "we learn about concepts such as beauty, pain faith, suffering, frustration, and love whose essence is lost through other research approaches" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 7).

Data in qualitative research does not come from hard and solid facts. It comes from being connected to the world of the subject to be known. Through understanding the subject within its world, we gain a more complete and whole understanding of the subject. Qualitative research does not study an isolated aspect of the subject, which may or may not have validity when applied to the complexity of the whole in its natural surroundings. It is rather a challenge to rational thinking.

This temper can best be described as a reaction against the static, the abstract, the purely rational, the merely irrational, in favor of the dynamic and the concrete, personal involvement and 'engagement', action choice and commitment, the distinction between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' existence, and the actual situation of the existential subject as the starting point of thought. (Becker, 1992, p. 9)

It is assumed that qualitative research will enable us to gain experiential meaning about the subject being studied. According to Becker, there are two premises upon which the phenomenological viewpoint is based. The first is that "experience is a valid and fruitful source of knowledge" (Becker, 1992, p. 10). The second premise is "that our everyday worlds are valuable sources of knowledge" (Becker, 1992, p. 10). According to phenomenological study, experience is the basis for understanding and knowledge.

It is assumed that the qualitative researcher is taking into account the effect that the research has on those being studied. It is also assumed that the researcher is able to put aside his or her own transference issues to study the subject's reported lived experiences: assumptions inherent in this

methodological approach are that the subjects are able to describe their experiences accurately and that the researcher is able to accurately find the meaning of the experience. Thus, the present study is based on a cooperative relationship between myself, as researcher, and the subjects, all of whom are interested in the topic of near-death experiences. It must be remembered, however, as stated by Greyson, "What we are studying is not the NDE itself, but a voluntary recounting of a memory of the NDE" (Greyson, 1981, p. 89).

According to Dr. Romanyshyn, in qualitative research, "there is no hidden depth; meaning is given through the surface of what appears to be" (Romanyshyn, 1995, July). In other words, in this methodological approach, it is assumed that meaning need only be extracted from surface information gained through the interview. From this perspective, I am able to view the subject of the research as a co-researcher, and I acknowledge that they know more about their own lived experience of near-death encounters than I do. Through their interviews, all research data for the study are gained. I also presume that the individual being interviewed is connected to the world in a typical manner as others facing the near-death experience.

The near-death experience would be difficult to quantify or to remove from the wider context of the subjects' overall life experience. The ability to study near-death subjects within their own natural context is a strength of qualitative research. It is the desire of this researcher to understand the

meaning of this human experience that makes qualitative research so valuable.

As a qualitative researcher, I do not distance myself from the world as a spectator. Rather, I enter the world of the subject to be researched as a co-researcher. I enter their world with the understanding that we will be moved and changed by the information that is revealed to us. We acknowledge and take into account that our research is not isolated from this experience, thus allowing us to become aware of our own transference issues and biases in the research and account for them in the reporting of the research.

It is important for me, as a qualitative researcher, to reflect upon my own objectivity and issues of bias. Since my research results will come from synthesizing information I have gathered, my own impressions of the subjects, along with the actual interviews, play an important role in the study's development. I will be including sections in the study that describe my own counter-transference to the material that exploit my own responses. These sections will reflect some of my own feelings and reactions to the subject's accounts, as well as describing aspects of my own near-death encounter.

Qualitative research does have limitations. Results may be particularly affected if the researcher has no awareness of his or her own biases. Outcomes could be drastically affected if questions are worded in such a way that the researcher is able to get the answers he or she wants to find. As Fischer (1974) has stated, "When a phenomenological psychologist

understands and acknowledges that his approach prefigures his questions, methods and results, then he is obliged to reawaken the issue of objectivity" (p. 407).

Identifying personal bias is not as easy for quantitative researchers who are looking for "objective" results. In their effort to remove the subject from the environment, under the guise of eliminating contamination, researchers are less aware of how they set up the experiment to favor the outcomes that they are looking for. By taking these measures, it appears to them that they have removed bias, when in fact, they may have introduced it.

One of the greatest difficulties facing the communication of analysis in phenomenology is that the thought processes it tries to analyze are in constant flux (Giorgi, 1985). The methodological approach is, by definition, subjective research dealing with self-reported perceptions. The understanding of the truth can change for an individual over time and thus the results from the same research might change if they were conducted later.

A strength of using qualitative research for this study lies in the selection of subjects to be studied. All of the subjects to be studied have been carefully chosen and have had a self-described near-death experience. It is presumed that these individuals are interested in the topic and are willing to work with me on the research. Their interest in the topic might prevent them from consciously giving false statements that would throw off the results of the research. If someone were to reveal results that are far from the norm in the research, I, as a qualitative researcher, would have the freedom to

remove the results of that participant. This is not an option available to the quantitative researcher.

However, the freedom to remove results also constitutes a limitation of the qualitative study. It would be possible to manipulate the results to suit my own personal biases by eliminating data that I do not want to accept. The danger of this distortion would increase to the degree that I did not place my own biases aside and allow the researched information space to speak for itself. When a researcher skews the findings, it serves as evidence that he or she was not affected by the information; rather the opposite took place. It may be said that he or she did not cook with the information.

The freedom of individually selecting near-death subjects to include in study may also be viewed as a limitation. Selected participants self-identify as near-death experiencers, and it is an important part of their lives. These people have already been in contact with others who share their experience, and it may have the effect of influencing them or altering their memories. This can be especially true if their desire to belong to this group is strong.

Qualitative research depicts the everyday life of the subject being researched. This is a strength, because it is a methodology that does not remove and isolate the subject from his or her environment while studying the NDE experience. It is reasonable to address this issue, since with the advancement of technology, it may be possible to simulate a near-death experience in a laboratory. As a qualitative researcher, I am able to view the

subject in his or her natural environment and thereby gain a greater understanding of the subject's experience.

However, this research is limited by the appropriateness of its questions. As a researcher with limited knowledge, I may not know the right questions to ask that would reveal more about the subject. It is likewise a limitation if the subject does not share information freely, does not clearly understand the questions, or are not telling the truth.

Interviews must involve personal interaction; cooperation is essential. Interviewees may not be willing to share all the information that is needed with the interviewer. The interviewer may not ask appropriate questions...the answers may not be properly comprehended by the interviewer. (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, pp. 82-83)

Another set of limitations experienced by all qualitative researchers results from the lack of ideal working conditions. As Patton (1980) pointed out, "There are always trade-offs. These trade-offs are necessitated by limited resources, limited time, and limits of the human ability to grasp the complex nature of social reality" (p. 95). Thus, there is no such thing as a perfect phenomenological study.

A strength of qualitative research is that anyone reading the research would be able to place it into the context of everyday life easily. The data present slices of life that occurred during a subject's everyday experience. The reader would probably be able to relate to or at least more easily understand reports of a near-death experience as it is described within the context of life, as opposed to the confines of a laboratory. Qualitative research gives us the norms that guide everyday experience. Because we

will all someday die, what is reported as a near-death experience may actually be an everyday experience.

From the research, I hope to extract information concerning the archetypal qualities of near-death experiences as a rite of passage towards spiritual maturity. I will also be exploring any personal changes that took place for the individuals as a result of their experience. I will explore interpersonal relationship changes and the participants' relationship to death before and after the experience. I want to explore any guilt or fear that may have resulted from the near-death experience. I will also be reflective during the interview and writing process to allow things to emerge that will provide insight into near-death experiences.

Acquiring Volunteers

Several avenues were available to me for obtaining subjects in this study. I contacted IANDS, The International Association for Near-Death Studies, and requested information on local chapter meetings. I wrote or telephoned the appropriate meeting chairperson and explained my research project, asking permission to post an announcement for interviewing volunteers. I also investigated the opportunity for placing a notice or flyer at the meeting explaining my desire for locating individuals willing to be interviewed who had had a near-death experience.

In addition, I contacted several other branches of IANDS through the Internet. After locating the appropriate chairperson, I requested permission to

send flyers explaining my research and requesting individuals to interview who have had an NDE so that they might be displayed at the local meeting and made available to anyone who might be interested. IANDS was a good choice for seeking out individuals for the research. Members are interested in the subject by virtue of their belonging to the group. Their networking stretches around the world, and they are well respected with notable members including Kenneth Ring and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross.

I also contacted local physicians and nurses and explored with them the possibilities of putting me in touch with individuals who have had an NDE and who were willing to be interviewed about their experience. I also searched out an appropriate bulletin board on the Internet in order to place an announcement requesting individuals to interview.

Volunteers were initially screened for their appropriateness to be included in the study. In order to qualify as research subjects, they must have experienced a life-threatening physical disorder and must have experienced an NDE in accordance to at least one of the common points as established by Dr. Kenneth Ring. These common points are feeling a separation from the body, seeing a dark tunnel, seeing a light, stepping into the light, and feeling a sense of peace (Ring, 1984). These guidelines established a general criterion from which samples could be taken.

Administering the Interviews

All of the participants were interviewed after having claimed to have had a near-death experience. They were asked to explore any changes they became aware of in themselves since their experience of the NDE. I also asked specific questions about the experience itself from a prepared list. The questions allowed me to compare and contrast the specific responses of each participant.

The interviews were conducted at the convenience of the individuals being interviewed. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and a half. I was willing to meet with local interviewees either at a convenient location of their choosing or at my office. Interviewees who resided in a location that was inconvenient for an in-person interview were interviewed over the telephone at my expense. I recorded each of the interviews using a cassette tape recorder once I received the permission of the interviewee.

One individual declined to have his interview recorded by tape. I recorded the interview by taking written notes. One individual refused to speak over the telephone and answered the prepared questions over the Internet.

After each interview, I transcribed the tape and studied it extensively. Case histories were written for each participant that described their NDE experiences and subsequent responses. Data was also analyzed to discern common themes that presented themselves in the reports of more than one participant.

Each participant had the opportunity to read his or her case history and make corrections or additions. This procedure helped to insure the accuracy of what is written. If corrections were needed, I made the corrections and returned the document to the participants once more for their comments.

Assumptions and Limitations

The assumptions for this study are that volunteers for this research reported a truthful explanation of their experiences and had not colluded with the other participants in any manner. It is assumed that the volunteers did in fact have an NDE.

The limitations of this study are that volunteers for this research cannot be assumed to represent the general population in their reports of near-death experiences. Furthermore, it is assumed that participants may be somewhat reluctant to discuss the full details of their experiences, thereby leaving the study incomplete. Results were determined from subjective responses to questions based on the volunteers' memory and emotions. They are therefore not verifiable, except through the good faith of the participants. Finally, the natures of the questions are suggestive and could be viewed as having led the participants in their answers.

Consent Forms and Precautions

All of the APA guidelines for conducting research with human volunteers were followed in carrying out this research. Approval from Pacifica Graduate Institute's Ethics Committee was obtained before commencing with human research subjects. All volunteers were required to sign an informed consent form, which is included in Appendix A. The volunteers were allowed to terminate the interview at any time. Confidentiality has been safeguarded so that no material the volunteer does not want published will be published. The names of all participants were held in confidence and changed within the research report as a measure to protect confidentiality. All promises made to subjects were adhered to. The volunteers were informed that no immediate or direct benefit would result from participating in the study.

After the completion of the study, all participants were provided with a full description of the study upon their request. All information obtained during the course of the interviewing that does not pertain to the study, or that which the volunteer asked to be withheld, remained confidential.

Chapter 3:

Case Study Investigation

Steven

The Physical Separation

Steven is a 42 year-old self-employed entrepreneur who gave the interview at his home in California. He is the founder and president of a company that refurbishes industrial equipment. In 1994, at the age of 37, while he was receiving an examination in a doctor's office, he experienced a heart attack. He was revived by a single fibrillation and was immediately hospitalized. Nine days later, during a procedure to alleviate a blood clot in his heart, he experienced a second heart attack. This time, it took seven fibrillations to revive him. During the time of each of the heart attacks, he went unconscious immediately. During both of these periods, he claims to have experienced what he called a near-death experience.

The Near-death Experience

Steven remembered having been conscious in the doctor's office when he felt a brief pain in his chest and then immediately found himself in another place. At one moment he was with his doctor, and the next he was somewhere else. According to Steven, both of his near-death experiences were identical. The first observation he noted during each of his experiences was that the ambient temperature felt perfect and he was in no pain.

At the beginning of the NDE, he found himself in what seemed to be a large, dark warehouse. He was surrounded by darkness, but noticed that in one corner of this space was a lighted area. Figures resembling people were standing in the light. He was unaware of having a physical body. However, as he looked at the people, he found himself propelled towards them. He does not recall walking to them; it felt similar to a gliding motion. The people themselves did not seem to have physical bodies, nor was he able to recognize who they were. He then engaged in a conversation with them, but he cannot recall what it was about.

During the first experience, he recalled beginning to have a conversation with one of the beings when he was called away and revived in the doctor's office. During the second near-death experience, he found himself engaged in a long and profound conversation with these beings. He reported having had the strong sense that these beings were family members. However, he was not able to identify any of them later as specific members of his family.

He noted that these beings emitted a vibrant blue color. He described it as captivatingly brilliant. A light also surrounded them of the same color. The light, however, appeared to be nondirectional. It felt to him that he was dealing on a soul level with these beings and that at this level the soul had physical properties. He continued to move about by gliding. There was no walking, just the smooth movement of gliding. He also claims that during the

time he was present with the beings, he had a profound sense of peace and a stronger sense of clarity of thought than he had ever experienced before.

The Return and Reintegration

During the time just before the near-death experience, Steven had been struggling with issues of faith in God. He was born Catholic. He attended religious school every week until junior high. In high school, he rejected Christianity. One afternoon, before his NDE, he was watching a televangelist on television and said that the program brought him back into the Christian belief. This experience, he said, led him to become more focused on religion. Since that experience, he became involved in the study of scripture.

Up to the time of his NDE, he felt that his role in the church was to be the guardian who kept the studies of the church biblically centered. He stated that before his near-death experience, he was judgmental of those who did not share his beliefs. He referred to himself as “acid” in the way he would handle others who did not share in his beliefs. He reported that he was respected by other members of his church for his rigid beliefs and willingness to defend them.

He felt that the near-death experience assisted him in letting go of his judgmental qualities. He said that God has come to him in meditations and tells him what to do. He now follows those requests. He feels that he is willing to follow God’s commands more closely now.

He said that he has moved from a hard-line Christian belief to one that is more open to the spirit of God. As a result of his experience, he was able to recognize that all religions have received something from God. He felt that he was more open to his studies now. He felt that he was now more accepting of others. His near-death experience has raised more questions for him about the nature of God.

As a result of his near-death experiences, Steven's personal behavior changed radically. He had been once seriously overweight and did not exercise. He stated that living in comfort was his priority at that time. Self-discipline was a problem for him. Things came easily to him, but when "the going got tough, he was gone."

The first change that he embodied, as a result of the near-death experience, was to get his health in order. Since the experience, he came to believe that life was about focused hard work. He now pays attention to the present moment and tries to live it to the fullest. He has also developed a creative side. He has been photographing, drawing, and writing ever since.

Steven has also become more involved as a father. He now spends time with his children, taking them to sporting events and helping them with homework. The experience has taught him that a relationship with others is what is important in life. He considered himself being very judgmental of others before his experience. He adhered to a very strict Christian perspective. He now feels that he is more open and tries to understand other people. The primary focus is on the individual, not on religion.

He reported that since the NDE, he now listens to his inner voice, which he feels is God speaking to him. He does this when making important decisions in his life, and he feels that the decisions that he makes are never wrong as a result. There have been times when the voice has told him to be friends with an individual whom he would not choose on his own. He feels that he is supposed to be friends with that individual for being of service to him or her in life. He feels that this guidance has been very helpful for those individuals.

He reports that his study has become broad. He now reads the religious writings of others as well as the Bible. He does this so that his understanding of life is more expansive.

Steven now views death as merely a transition from one level to another. Death, he reported, is not something to fear; however, it is not something to rush towards either. He is afraid of God, not death. God, he stated, is in full control of his life and can take it away any time he wishes. Steven felt that God was trying to get his attention by giving him an NDE. He was trying to teach him the nature of the soul. It was a "soul level" experience for him. He claimed that his understanding of what happens after death changed. He used to believe in the traditional stories of heaven and hell. He has come to believe that individuals do go to a better place; however, it is not the heavenly place that is traditionally thought of.

Before he had the NDE, he was wrestling with the issue of Abraham. He felt confused over how Abraham could take his son Isaac to the Mount

and offer him up as a sacrifice. He questioned how a man could have such faith. The issue involved a commitment to God. He claimed that the NDE solved this question for him and left him with a stronger commitment to God.

He came out of the experience with what he called three truths. The first was that he did not know how much time he had left in this life. He had taken life for granted before his NDE. The second truth was that his family should be his number-one priority. The third truth was that he had not lived up to his full potential. When things got difficult, he would give up easily.

Steven has been left with some questions resulting from the near-death experience. He felt a sense of timelessness during the experience, as if time did not exist. The experiences felt as if they lasted for hours, although he was unconscious for only a few seconds during both. He wanted to know what else happened during his NDE. He also wanted to know who those family members were that he met during the experience.

Sally

The Physical Separation

Sally gave this interview in the surroundings of her office. She is now 57 years old, a licensed psychotherapist, and single parent in Los Angeles, California. She is a divorced mother of two. She has a daughter who is 20, and a son who is 17. Her estranged husband died several years ago. She does not adhere to a traditional religion; however, she does consider herself a spiritual individual.

Her near-death experience took place during her early 20's in the Philippines in 1967 while she was a volunteer for the Peace Corps. Her experience began when she was visiting with a friend. They went to a secluded waterfall with a collection pool where they could go swimming. The waterfall came down through a rock cliff and created an inviting, swirling motion in the pool below.

They dove into the pool and began to swim, enjoying the warm afternoon. They had been swimming for quite some time when it began to rain gently. After a short while, the storm progressed and the rain fell harder. As it rained, the runoff from the higher ground emptied into the stream that fed the waterfall. The added water from the rain caused the flow of the waterfall to grow more powerful, and thus the whirlpool action it created became stronger.

By the time they decided to leave the water, whirlpool had become quite swift. Sally was the last one to attempt to exit the water. She was having some difficulty getting out, so another man, who was along for the picnic, reached in to pull her out. By this time, the rocks upon which he was standing had become slippery, and when he bent over to help her, he slipped into the water himself. She then began to panic.

The Near-death Experience

With each pass of the whirlpool, Sally grew weaker. Others tried to grab her hand but were not able to. She finally sank into the water and it was

at that point that she “knew” she was going to die. She recalled that at that moment, she felt a profound sense of peace and acceptance of her fate. She became calm and stopped fighting the water. It was at that moment she saw tunnel with a light at the end of it. It filled her with deep tranquillity. While in this place, she had the sense of her mother being present with her. Her mother had died many years earlier, when she was only 10 days old.

Suddenly, a physical jolt upwards shocked her out of the tunnel. Someone was able to grab her blouse, pull her out of the water, and drag her to the edge of the pool. She woke up and shook for an hour before calming down.

At the moment she saw the tunnel, Sally sensed a separation from her body. She claimed to have been able to identify the moment of transition because she had been fighting the current with everything she had, and when she entered the tunnel, she lost the sensation of struggle in her body. At the moment she felt she was going to die, she relaxed and lost awareness of her body.

She remembered feeling a profound sense of all-is-well and clear thinking as she entered the tunnel. She did not remember breathing in water. The experience was very peaceful. She remembered cooperating with the experience and not fighting it.

While Sally was in the tunnel, she had no peripheral vision and was moving towards a light that seemed to be the source of her peace. She was moving towards the light with a gliding motion. She was not walking.

Everything else was dark. She felt focused on the light. The light was like a brilliant sunlight and appeared to contain all colors. Though the light was bright, it did not hurt her eyes. Rather, it seemed to glow.

Sally does not recall meeting with anyone or reviewing her life. However, she had the sense of her mother's presence during this experience. While she was in a tunnel, she let go of all of her worries. She did not feel weighted down with life's issues.

The Return and Reintegration

As we were going over her experience, Sally said that she felt an internal welling up of emotion. When she spoke of her mother's presence in the tunnel, she became teary. She reported that she felt that her near-death experience was wonderful. She felt that her NDE has allowed her to grow as a therapist. The wonder and confusion that were created by the NDE have allowed her to be empathetic with others who have had experiences that are difficult to explain. In cases where it has been appropriate and useful, she has shared her experience with clients.

Sally claims that her life changed significantly after the near-death experience. As a consequence of these events, she lost her fear of death. Her acceptance of death has resulted in her becoming more bold in life. Before her experience, Sally was introverted and shy; afterwards, she found herself more daring. The NDE, she claimed, led her to become a more spiritual person. Her experience was something that she has kept personal.

She did not share the experience with many other people. She did not trust others to hold this intimate experience with the respect and reverence it deserved.

Sally felt that she was chosen for the experience. She had an extremely difficult childhood. Her mother died when she was 10 days old. Her father married another woman when she was 2. This other woman was recognized as her mother from that day forward. She did not get along with her stepmother. She was raped when she was 8 years old. In her adolescence, her stepmother was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Sally became pregnant at 19. She felt lost and entered into the Peace Corps to find herself. She referred to this experience as “running away” to join the Peace Corps.

As a result of her experiences with the Peace Corps in the Philippines, Sally became critical of the consumerism of the American culture. She returned home with ideas of living more simply. She also credits her near-death experience as contributing to those ideas as well. The experience seemed to punctuate those ideas. It gave her the confidence to live by her ideals.

The NDE changed Sally’s spiritual perspective as well. She was born into a Christian fundamentalist family and was involved with going to church on a regular basis until college. There was a time when she was afraid to leave the fundamentalist religion. Her obligation to the religion was out of fear rather than conviction. Before her near-death experience, her spiritual

views were in flux. Since the experience, she has changed her view of spiritual reality.

She now views all individuals as souls who come to earth to have lives and then return to where they came from. She described death as another doorway to a continuation of life. However, she related feeling some fear around pain that she might experience before death. She also admitted having little fear that she does not have the full story about death.

Because of having had three near-drowning experiences, including the one that permitted the near-death experience, Sally remains afraid of drowning. Interestingly, she has lost all of her fear of spiritual retribution for having left the fundamentalist religion. She now feels that she will be safe in death. She has lost all fear of God as a punishing entity and feels that God accepts her as she is.

Tom

The Physical Separation

Tom is a 35-year-old financial planner living in Los Angeles, California. Late in 1997, he was diagnosed with cancer. He was hospitalized in January of 1998 for laser surgery to remove the carcinoma. As a result of the surgery, he began to lose weight and was placed in intensive care. After a week in intensive care, he was continuing to do poorly.

One afternoon, as he was lying in bed, the monitor scanning his vital signs sounded an alarm and the screen went flat. At that moment, there was

an increase of activity in his room among the staff. He found his focus drifting away from the room and his mind becoming very quiet. Then, he noticed a stifling silence. Immediately following the silence, he developed a sensation of being raised above the bed. He found himself in a state of total peace. He thought to himself that he was being raised to heaven.

The Near-death Experience

On either side of himself, Tom saw two doves. They seemed to be supporting his body and lifting him upward. While he was being raised above the bed, he heard soft, tranquil sounds that seemed to be some kind of music. He reported the feeling of being raised as if by a magnetic force. The moment upward was smooth and gliding.

As the experience continued, Tom found himself entering into deeper and deeper states of tranquillity. He described the music that he heard as something akin to a hum. He reported that it was the most peaceful sound he could ever imagine. It continued the entire time he was being raised above the bed.

Tom reported that his thinking felt clear and calm. He knew that he was going to the most beautiful place he could possibly imagine, and he did not struggle or question the experience. He wanted to go where he was being taken.

He looked upward and saw a beautiful light. He described it as a soft, subtle, glow, and he knew that he was heading towards it. The light did not hurt his eyes. It seemed to be calling him to enter.

Tom did not remember how he was revived. He did remember that a nurse ran out of the room to get the doctors. He recalled re-entering his body with a sudden startle and opening his eyes to see a nurse looking at him.

The Return and Reintegration

Although he did not consciously recall anyone speaking to him during the near-death experience, Tom returned with an awareness of God asking him to look more closely at his life. He felt as if he were told to make changes. In order to fulfill this request, Tom took it upon himself to look deeper into what kind of person he was. As a result, he felt the experience has guided him to experiencing more empathy for others.

He related that in the past he considered himself arrogant with others and took his health for granted. He had never been seriously ill before, nor had he ever been hospitalized. After the NDE, he began to pay attention to his health. He also made a conscious effort to eliminate the arrogance he once expressed. He now feels more appreciation for other people.

Tom stated that he wanted to return to heaven and he was willing to do whatever it took to get there and to be a better person. In his view, being a better person entails being more forgiving and being more willing to share. He also stated that it was important for him to not think about himself as

much as he used to. He now wants to focus on helping others to live better lives.

Tom found that enacting these changes was a difficult task. He referred to himself as being very stubborn. He said that he experiences an internal battle in side of himself everyday to do something kind for another. He finds that each day this practice becomes easier to accomplish. During our discussion, he became emotional when describing the near-death experience. He stated that his sudden burst of emotion was a surprise to him.

Since the near-death experience, Tom's relationships have changed. He came from a family that did not communicate with each other. Personal feelings were never discussed. His near-death experience has led him to encourage his family to be more open and sharing of their feelings. He felt that his family has now become closer as the result of the personal changes he has made since his NDE.

Tom did not tell his doctors of his experience. He felt that this experience was God's way of assisting him to change his life and help others. He wants others to know how peaceful this place was, and that people should do whatever it takes to obtain that peace for themselves. He stated that he returned with an awareness of the importance of loving others and that loving others has something to do with the light that he saw. The light of the NDE was a place of total peace.

In Tom's view, his experience was God's way of saying that this was a turning point in his life and that he needed to make changes. He felt that if he continued on the path that he followed before the near-death experience, he might not reach heaven. He now feels that his work here on earth is to help others and therefore, it will make him a better person.

Tom now wants to help other people in any way possible. In the process, he has come to have a greater understanding of himself. He felt that the near-death experience was a true awakening for his own personal growth.

The experience helped him to lose his fear of death. He felt that the NDE helped him to realize how precious life is. He stated that before the experience, he was coasting through life. He now feels that that has all changed. He is no longer coasting but working hard to enact the changes.

Tom does have one fear that resulted from the NDE, and that is the fear of slipping back into his old selfish mindset. To prevent this, he is trying to make the changes a habit. He does this by removing the focus from himself and trying to understand others better.

At the time of the NDE, Tom was Catholic. He reported that in the past when he went to mass and prayed, his mind often wandered. Now, having experienced an NDE, he feels a closer communication with God when he prays. He has found that he stays focused while praying since his experience. In the past, he just went through the motions. Now, he feels as

if he is truly having a dialogue with God. For him, the NDE was a transformative experience.

Marco

The First and Second Physical Separation

Marco was interviewed in Los Angeles, California. He is 59 years old and claimed to have had three NDEs during the course of his life. His first near-death experience took place when he was 7 years old in 1946. The second experience happened in 1952 at the age of 13, and the third 1993 at the age of 54.

The first near-death experience happened in Mexico. He was 7 years old when he fell out of the moving car. The last thought he remembered was seeing the rocks in the road coming up to meet him. As he hit the ground, he blacked out and then experienced a warm nurturing feeling. That was all he could remember of his first experience.

In 1952 at the age of 13, Marco tried to commit suicide with natural gas in an attempt at escaping an abusive family situation. At the moment of blacking out, he experienced a feeling of rapidly entering a tunnel through a gliding motion.

The Second Near-death Experience

While Marco was in the tunnel, he became aware of the presence of other beings, but was unable to determine who they were. At the end of the

tunnel, he saw a light. However, between himself and the light he saw a vast waterway. Across this waterway was the figure of an old man who was standing behind a large closed gate. When the man saw Marco, he rose into the air, and as he did so, the gates began to open.

The man then invited Marco in with a gesture. He understood the request of the old man without words. He experienced a sense of knowing that he was invited to come in and see what was behind the gate. As he glided through the gates, he entered a garden. It was the most beautiful garden he had ever seen. While he was there, he became aware of listening to what he described as the most beautiful music he had ever known. All the while, he experienced a feeling of warmth and unconditional acceptance emanating from the old man.

Marco tried to determine where the music was coming from. To his astonishment, he realized that the sound came from the flowers. As he listened more closely, he discovered that they were all singing the same song in one chorus. They were not singing through mouths, they were singing through color. He described the experience as a blending of the senses of being able to hear color.

As he looked around, he noticed a pathway leading into a cloistered area. There, on the pathway, he could see other people moving towards the enclosure. He noticed that as the people were moving towards the cloistered area, they would look at him and then look away. There was a woman

among those in the procession who was very beautiful and was wearing an old-fashioned dress.

As she looked at him, he felt that he had known her for all time. He had the feeling that she recognized him. He wanted to go up to her. As they moved closer, he could feel a tremendous unconditional love coming from her towards him. However, her advancement was halted as the old man came between them. Not with words, but through understanding, Marco was told he was not to touch the woman.

In this place, all communication was through understanding. No words were ever used. The old man told him that he would see the woman again at another time. She then returned to the pathway with the other people. He tried to follow her at a distance along the path. As he did, a beautiful golden light distracted him. It was brilliant, and it came directly towards him. As it came closer, he began to feel guilt over his attempted suicide.

He then realized that suicide was not going to resolve his problems. While in the garden, he experienced an unconditional love that allowed him to feel more compassion towards himself. This new sense of self-compassion would later help him through a difficult adolescence. He wanted to remain in that bath of unconditional love, but was also told he could not stay and that he would have to go back.

The Second Return and Reintegration

No sooner had Marco realized that he would have to return when he found himself blacking out once more. He awoke in the hospital. His grandmother questioned him repeatedly about the woman he reported in the near-death experience. She also warned him to never speak about it. He later found out that the woman he described was an aunt who had died before he was born.

The second near-death experience allowed him not to be affected by the abuse. He found himself able to sidestep and avoid the negativity. He was given more understanding about his situation and therefore found more compassion for himself and never attempted suicide again.

The Third Physical Separation

The third experience was Marco's most extensive. He had difficulty using words to describe it. He characterized himself as having become very materialistic as he matured. He became a financial planner for a bank. His controlling attitude had worked well for him in attaining wealth; however, it did not bring him happiness.

At the time just before the near-death experience, Marco had completed a divorce from his wife, and was experiencing a serious financial setback. He was in the process of recuperating from these emotional traumas and decided to move in with a friend. He stated that he had reached a low point in his life at that time. He felt he had been pushing himself too

hard. He was also a smoker and he had an improper diet. He was not resting, just pushing himself. In the deep recesses of his mind, he was aware that he had to change his lifestyle, but he paid no attention to it and only focused on material gain.

One morning, Marco was ascending the stairs to his bedroom when he felt a severe pain in his chest. He reported this condition to his doctor, who wanted him hospitalized for observation. He refused to go to the hospital, preferring to handle the upset stomach and nausea on his own.

At 11:15 p.m., he awoke with discomfort in his chest and decided to call the hospital. As he was walking down the hallway for the telephone, he experienced another sharp, excruciating pain in his chest that caused him to double over. He remembered hitting his shoulder on the wall as he was falling to the floor. As he saw the floor coming up at him, he blacked out.

The Third Near-death Experience

Although Marco had the sense of blacking out, he remembered how odd it seemed at that moment to still be aware of his thought processes. He found himself in total darkness. He felt as though he were in a very dark pit. It was totally black. He described it as being blackest black that could be imagined. The blackness resulted not only from an absence of color and light, but also from an absence of sound. He became frightened. A dark feeling of total isolation began to creep over his consciousness. He found himself lost in a vast nothingness.

While in the void, Marco kept asking himself why he could not hear or see anything. He remembered trying to yell, but nothing would come out. It was as though his words went nowhere. Despite his state of alarm, he realized that he was no longer feeling pain, but he was also aware that he could not feel his body. The blackness was oppressive and became more frightening. As his fear gave way to panic, he cried into the darkness, "God help me." At that moment, he saw a spark of light out in the distance. It was enough to let him know that he was not totally alone. There was somebody or something else out there.

Although he was frightened, his thought processes were clear. He never lost his sense of self-awareness. He reasoned that if he could get over to the spark, he might feel more comfortable. However, he felt as if he was being held back from the light by some force.

Again, he thought to himself, "I do not belong here." At that moment, a light came on again in the distance resembling the glow of a candle. Now, he was no longer in total blackness. Fearing the candlelight might go out, he said to himself, "Oh God, please don't blow it out." His fear continued to build. He did not know where he was.

Suddenly, two more lights appeared off in the distance about the same size. When he saw them, he felt that these lights would protect him. However, his moment of relief quickly retreated to dread; what terrifying things might exist in the distance between himself and those lights?

Marco knew that he wanted to join them, but he did not know how. As he focused on the lights, he began to realize that they were not candles at all; they were beings of light. Although they were at a great distance, he understood one of the light beings to have said, " We have come for you."

At this point, Marco began to panic, but he knew that if he could get to the lights, he would be safe. With that thought alone, he instantly found himself surrounded by light. The light induced within him a sense of comfort similar to the feelings one has when embraced by a loved one. He had the reassuring feeling that the light would not let him get lost in the darkness.

Marco had the sensation of moving upwards while in the light. He also sensed the presence of somebody who loved him very much. He then noticed other little sparks of light appearing out in the darkness. It was at this point that the light beings began speaking to him. He did not remember what they told him; he just knew that he was going to be saved.

It was at this moment he described having had a past life review. It was not his entire life, just the important interpersonal parts of it. While the life review took place, he continued to rise higher, he noticed that off in the distance, the little sparks of light began to join together and form a snake of light all moving in the same direction. He was now very high looking down at it.

As the lights came together, they pushed back the darkness, and Marco began to feel a sense of joy. The ribbon of light continued to grow and became the most beautiful kaleidoscope of color. It was made up of all of the

colors of the rainbow and more. He saw colors that he had never seen before. It was then that he realized that each point of light was a soul. He said that the realization filled him with so much joy that he wanted to jump up and down. He knew that each soul was going back to the Creator. He wanted to join them, but there was still an expanse of blackness between him and the other sparks of light. The tiny lights soon became an ocean of multicolored light.

One of the light beings directed Marco to look in the distance towards a mountain that looked like a crystal with a golden light and beings inside. It seemed as if it were a home. He did not know how to get there. When he said he wanted to go there, the beings communicated, "No you don't."

At that moment, a light like a million suns lit up and there was no blackness anywhere. The light said to him, "Come to me, you are mine." The beings of light were then behind him. He found himself racing towards the source of the light. As he grew closer, he exploded with emotion and felt himself become the light.

While bathed in that light, Marco reported having an awareness of everything that had taken place since the beginning of time. He was shown the beginning of creation with the beginning of light. Before he could ask a question, he had the answer. He reported that there was no distinction between himself and the light. The light told him that he had not finished his work. He was told he needed to return. At that moment, he found himself back in his body in excruciating pain.

Marco thought to himself, "I don't want this." Then he heard a tiny voice off in the distance say, "Hang up, someone will be there." He was now sitting in a chair with the telephone receiver in his hand. He blacked out again.

He then found himself at the top of a two-story building. It was his apartment building. He saw two men running with a litter into his building. He then saw them pick up a body, which he did not recognize as his own. They put the body on a gurney and left his arm sticking out. He tried to tell them to put the arm inside, but to no avail. The arm fell between the rails and was severely pinched.

While he was observing the rescue scene, he was also listening to the conversations of the onlookers across the street. His neighbors had gathered to see what was going on. He was aware of both places at the same time. He then found himself following the ambulance all the way to the hospital. He was aware of being both inside and outside of the ambulance. He remembered hearing the thoughts of the driver and staff in the ambulance. He did not question any of this; he just went with the experience.

The Third Return and Reintegration

When Marco arrived at the hospital, they put an IV in his arm, and it was at that point that he again began to have feeling in his body and regained consciousness. The experience felt like it lasted for hours.

A month later, Marco successfully set out to confirm the conversations his neighbors had during the rescue. In the hospital, a nurse asked him how he ended up with such a large hematoma on the inside of his arm. He told her that his arm was left outside of the gurney when they transported him. The injuries to the arm were compatible with the arm having been left out. However, she did not understand how he could know that, because he had been unconscious the entire time he had been transported to the hospital.

During the NDE, he was told the nature of his illness and what needed to be done to remedy it. It was communicated to him that if he underwent open-heart surgery, he would end up paralyzed. At the hospital, they urged him to sign a consent form to allow open-heart surgery. He told them no. They explained to him that the NDE he was reporting was a hallucination and that he needed open-heart surgery. He told the doctors that there were blockages in his heart that they knew nothing about and that he would not allow them to operate.

Three days later, further testing revealed other blockages, which contraindicated surgery. His doctor asked him how he knew about the other blockages. When he told him the information came from the NDE, he brushed off the response by saying, "Well, there are some things we don't understand." Marco said nothing more to his doctors.

After his third near-death experience, Marco enacted substantial changes in his life. He quit smoking and began to eat more healthfully. He did not feel the desire to push hard to get things done. Before his near-death

experience, he had been a banker. He found himself impatient and demanding. He was always striving for more; he was results oriented. Before his heart attack, he desired to make positive changes in his life. However, he would find every excuse not to.

Since his experience, Marco reported that he no longer felt pressured by time. He found himself more relaxed. As his life changed after the near-death experience, he began to accept things as they are. He placed more value on people and less on objects. An ability to perceive things began to develop. He claimed that after the near-death experience, he found himself able to conceive the outcome of an action before it was completed. These changes happened naturally and effortlessly. He did not have to think about them.

Before the near-death experience, Marco kept in the company of people who were materialistic and fast paced. But afterwards, he found himself no longer able to relate to those people, preferring quiet time to the fast-paced life he once lived. He has also noticed that he did not lose patience with his family members as he did before the near-death experience.

Because his doctors did not acknowledge his report of the near-death experience and told him that he was hallucinating, he spoke no further to them about the matter. Their reaction had the effect of shutting him down from telling anybody. It took some time for him to begin talking about his experiences again.

Marco's experiences have given him proof of a higher power, which he refers to as God. He feels that part of the awareness of that higher power may be found in all religions. Part of his personal mission, since the near-death experience, has been to raise awareness that there is life after physical death. This has given new meaning to his earthly experience.

He wants to help people understand that death is a process and that consciousness continues after the passing of the body. He can see that everyone has a purpose in life. He feels that his mission in this existence is to bring others to the awareness that they are powerful agents of change in their own lives. He also wants them to know that they are loved by the universe.

During the third NDE, many answers were given to him regarding questions he had about politics, values, and beliefs. He went from being money oriented to altruistic. He found himself living hand to mouth and feeling secure in it. He now feels that he is able to give more of himself to others since he is less encumbered by materialist desires. He wants to help people become aware of their goodness. He has a strong desire to be of service to others.

During his experience, Marco learned that each act we perform, no matter how insignificant, can have a dramatic effect on another, and can actually change the world. He took away from the experience an understanding of the oneness of the universe. He learned that all acts that we do to another are ultimately done unto ourselves. His experience helped

him to realize that we are one with the universe, literally. He now believes that each of his actions affect all life. As a result of his experience, he does not try to control or influence anything or anyone. He allows others to have their experiences and walk their own paths.

After his third near-death experience, Marco discovered that he could actually see the life essence leaving a dying body as a multicolored sphere. He now volunteers in hospices to assist people who are dying. He has frequent opportunities to witness individuals making the transition through death. He claimed to see a swirling kaleidoscope sphere of color leaving the body as a person dies. He then watches it disappear a few feet away. He stated that it gives him great joy to witness such an event. He finds himself excited for individuals as they embark on what he refers to as their journeys.

His enthusiasm for life beyond is contagious and is an apparent source of strength for those in their final moments. He talks with those who are open to what he has to say and he feels that they benefit from his experience. When working with the dying, it is his intent to help make the transition easier for them.

Marco stressed that the worthiness of each individual being here is important. The most important things we can do in this existence are to give love and to be in service to others. In his life review, he saw how his existence was able to change another's life just because his appearance reminded the individual of someone else.

It was his appearance at a particular moment that affected the other individual. Because that individual changed, it caused people around him to change. Consequently, the changes built upon each other and affected the world. This is how important our beingness is. He stated that we do not realize just how important it is for us to exist and he feels that his NDE has given him a gift of that understanding.

Kimberly

The Physical Separation

Kimberly completed the interview through corresponding on the Internet. She was given the written form of the same questions asked during the verbal interviews. She responded by mailing back her written response to the questions from her home. Kimberly is 27 years old and currently lives in Kentucky. The following is a compilation of her correspondence.

Kimberly's near-death experience took place in August of 1991 when she was 19. She has since been diagnosed with a heart-valve disorder. The incident began while she was traveling as a passenger in the back of a car going from Los Angeles to Oakland, California. For no apparent reason, her heart began to race while seated in the back seat and she subsequently became dizzy. Nausea and a visual sensation of brilliant colors followed the dizziness. As she slipped into unconsciousness, her awareness drifted away from the car.

The Near-death Experience

Kimberly next found herself conscious, but in a dense, oppressive, blackness. She described it as a terrifying dark, damp cloud that came over her. She says that she had never felt fear as deeply as she did at that moment in the black void of nothingness. She was completely alone and disconnected from everything in the blackness.

In her fear and confusion, she called out “Jesus.” She described the following event as a “battle” between a being in white light and the surrounding darkness. Immediately following the battle, the light overtook the darkness and she found herself face down in worship in front of that same being of light. While in the presence of that being, she felt an internal warmth and an intense feeling of love. She described the feeling as an all-encompassing unconditional love. She had never felt love so completely and totally before.

In the next instant, Kimberly found herself above the moving car looking down at herself in the back seat. While she was floating above the car, she sensed someone with her to her left wearing a garment resembling a white robe. She could describe what he looked like, but she never looked directly at him. She understood that his identity would not be revealed. She reasoned it to mean that his identity did not have importance to what she was about to experience. She sensed that he was there to serve as a guide for her. Together, they began to move up above the earth and eventually into

outer space. They were traveling at such a high rate of speed that the stars and planets seemed to pass by her very quickly.

Kimberly was not sure she had the order correct for the following series of events. She claimed they did happen, but was not sure in what order. She next described becoming aware of her presence in a bright white "room." The room seemed to be enclosed, but it did not have walls. While in the room, she saw a man in a white robe standing behind a podium with a book on it. He emitted a brilliant white light. As she approached him, his light grew brighter. She believed the book to be the book of life from the Bible. She remembered thinking to herself in reference to the Bible, "Uh-oh, that stuff was for real."

In the presence of that being, Kimberly began to realize that the "God" she had been presented with through her religious upbringing was not anything like the reality. She understood that it did not matter if you called Him God, Alla, Great Spirit, or any other name. He was the same in all beliefs. She realized that different religions had different ways of explaining the same Creator. She also realized that the little voice inside of herself that prompted her to do good things came from the Creator. She recognized the voice as the Light of Love that was inside each of us.

While she was in the room, Kimberly was given a life review. She stated that she did not remember being shown her entire life. She only remembered reviewing a part of it. The part that she remembered was the

part that involved the last several weeks of her life, during which she claimed to have given up on God.

She was shown in her review how her acts of selfishness and insensitivity affected others. What hurt her the most during the review was when she witnessed how she had injured others and the effect it had on them. The fact that she was a lesbian had no importance to the review. The review was done in an atmosphere of nonjudgment and acceptance. She was surprised by that, given the strict Christian beliefs she was raised with. She had expected to be judged and condemned for her actions.

Kimberly then remembered entering another room or space where there were others. She was not able to recognize anyone. She was then shown a diagram that symbolized life choices. Its message, she felt, was that each choice led to other choices. All actions that we enact have corresponding consequences that affect others.

Kimberly then began to receive what she called awareness of “all knowledge.” This information did not come to her as spoken words, but rather as complete thoughts of understanding. The information was not received through hearing with her ears, but through hearing with her mind. As soon as she had a question in her mind, she instantly had a clear answer in the form of words and pictures.

She not only received an answer to each question, but was instructed about the why and how of everything in the entire universe fit together in relationship to that question. Everything from the beginning of time made

sense to her. She was so impressed with that new awareness that she remembered thinking in her excitement; "I have to remember this."

When she looked over to the right, she saw in the distance a beautiful valley with many people. There was another individual above looking out over the entire vista. She felt that it was Jesus. She then looked down and saw a line. She began to step over the line with the intent to join the others. She was then told, "If you cross that line you can not go back, it would mean you would have to die." Until that moment, the thought of her dying never crossed her mind. She had been cooperating with the entire experience without questioning it, which is something that in hindsight seemed unusual for her to do.

Until that point, she had given no thought to the idea that she was separated from her body. She did not question the experience, although she had seen her body in the car. During the entire experience, she felt physically complete.

She remembered laughing and thinking to herself that this was not how she pictured death. She told them she wanted to stay. She was then told that her friends and her mother would be deeply hurt if she left them. She understood that she should return.

The Return and Reintegration

Kimberly then heard the sound of angels singing, and it seemed as if the clouds were lit up in the night sky. The next thing she remembered was

finding herself sitting in the back of the car. She remembered regaining consciousness in the car, all the while hearing the most beautiful music. She could still hear the angels singing as she opened her eyes.

She did not tell anyone of her experience. She wanted to return to that place. However, she instinctively knew she was not to do anything to bring that about on purpose. This was a direct reference to not committing suicide accidentally, on purpose, or through mistreatment of her body. She later tried to recall what she had learned when she was filled with “all knowledge,” but she was not able to remember it.

Her life changed after the near-death experience. Before the experience, she self-reported living a fast life-style. She was involved with drugs and partying. She was an employee of a large circus in their concession unit. She stated that she had planned to remain with the show until retirement.

She had no plans or aspirations beyond staying with the circus. After the near-death experience, Kimberly lost interest in partying and drugs. It was a change that she did not give much thought to; she just lost interest in self-destructive behavior. She said it was not a conscious decision. She stated that “cleaning up my act” was an indirect result of her NDE. It just came naturally.

During the NDE, she remembered being told to move to Virginia, which she did. She was not told why she should move. She stated that looking back on it, it was time for her to move on. She said that she felt she was to

move there to experience spiritual growth. As a result of the move, she became involved in the horticulture industry in Virginia and has since completed a degree in entomology and is currently working on a master's degree. She presently carries out research on honeybees, a honeybee pest, and transgenic corn.

Kimberly stated that she entered into entomology by accident. She was first trying to major in a physical therapy program in college in Virginia. Her program was canceled and she had to find a new major. Her first thought was horticulture. However, most of the classes that she had taken would transfer more easily over to an entomology major. In entomology, she had frequent opportunities to take exotic insects to elementary schools and delight the children with a new experience.

She said that from the time she was little, she had a fascination with living things. As a child, she had many types of pets, from bugs to fish and birds. She used to grow corn and beans in the windowsill of her parents' apartment. As she grew, she said that she "lost her way in life" and forgot about the things she cared about. She felt that the NDE brought her back to the things that she loved much earlier in life.

She stated that she tends a large garden at the university farm. She grows and cans most of the vegetables that they serve at the school. She only uses pesticides when it is absolutely necessary. She stated, "I prefer to grow a little extra to insure that there is enough to go around." This is her way of sharing and being of service to others.

Because of her near-death experience, her relationships with others have changed. She has become especially sensitive to how her actions affect others since her NDE. She takes great care in handling them with respect. Her experience has left her with the belief that interpersonal relationships are what are important in this life. She now feels that the purpose of life is to “take care of each other, help each other, love each other.”

She feels more responsibility for her life now. Knowing what is coming next gives her more responsibility for living her life the way she feels she should. Healthy relationships with others have become important in her life.

She grew up believing that she was damned for being a lesbian and was frightened of the idea of dying. The idea of standing before a vengeful and judgmental god at the moment of death was disturbing to her. She stated, “When a person believes that they are damned, death is never welcomed.” Her near-death experience has caused her to view death in a totally different light. She now looks forward to her encounter with death again. However, she would never do anything to purposefully bring it about.

Presently, when friends or family die, her experience is much different than it was in the past. Before, she would pray for their souls, concerned about what punishment may have befallen them. Now, she feels that she has seen a glimpse of where they are headed, and it brings her joy. When she grieves for them, it is because she misses them and not because she wants to bring them back from where they are.

She has lost her fear of death completely. She refers to dying as going home. However, she says that she would miss her family if she were separated from them.

Before the near-death experience, she wavered between fundamentalist Christianity and atheism. She stated that her dabbling in atheism resulted from her rebellion against the condemnation of fundamentalism. She did not want any part of a god that would not accept her for who she was. After her experience, she stated that she now “knows” we have a Creator who is omnipresent. She sees him as a loving and caring One who is not accurately portrayed through the organized religions. In His presence, she felt accepted as a lesbian. This experience has led her to more self-acceptance and greater peace with herself. She has no interest in whether other people believe her story or not.

Bill

The First Physical Separation

Bill is a 49-year-old man in early retirement from the Sheriff's Department in Michigan, where he was a highly decorated Assistant Sheriff. He now lives in Idaho on a ranch surrounded by his beloved animals. The interview was conducted by telephone to his home. He had two experiences over the course of his life. The first near-death experience took place when he was 3 in 1953, and the second was when he was 20 in 1970.

The first NDE Bill experienced took place when he was 3 at a lake while on vacation with his parents in Michigan. They were staying at a friend's cabin. Bill was playing down by the water near a device that was used to keep minnows and other bait alive in a holding pond. A pipe went out into the lake to pull fresh water into the bait area. He and the other children made a game out of playing with the intake pipe. They would go into the lake and swim near the intake pipe to let the suction pull them down. Then, they would push away and swim back up to the water's surface.

On this particular occasion, he was not strong enough to free himself from the pipe and remained under the water. He does not remember breathing in any water or feeling any pain. The next thing he became aware of was that he was looking down at his body in the water and saw his father pulling him out. He then witnessed his father giving him CPR by lifting his arms over his head in a pumping manner. While still in a disembodied state,

he saw a beautiful golden light above himself and then later he saw other children playing around him.

He joined in play with the other children in a game called double jumping. Double jumping, he said, was a game that the other children taught him to play while he was waiting to be resuscitated. The idea of the game is to jump up as hard as you can. When you do, you go up and up, and up, and then, when you begin to slow down, you are allowed to jump again. It was great fun, and when it was over, you ended up where you started. You would get two jumps.

The First Return and Reintegration

Many years later, while he was listening to a speaker give a talk on NDEs, he mention that some children who have experienced NDEs have reported a phenomenon called double jumping but did not know what this meant. Bill was able to explain to him what double jumping was, since he himself had played the game. This was a validating experience for Bill.

Because the experience happened when he was so young, Bill accepted it without question. It did not frighten him; it just seemed to him to be a natural and common experience. Later, when he tried to explain the NDE to his family, they did not believe him. One of the reasons they did not believe him was because he told his mother that during the experience he remembered looking up at the sun and it was so beautiful and warm. She dismissed his story by telling him, "When we found you, you were face down

in the mud.” After receiving this type of response to his story, he stopped talking about it with others. When he grew older, he realized that it was not the sun he was looking at, but the light that is so often mentioned by others who have experienced an NDE.

The Second Physical Separation

The second NDE happened in 1970 while he was a lab assistant in the mollusk division at the University of Michigan. He was married and had a 6-month old son. His Jeep had broken down, and he had to hitch a ride home. He was picked up by a van that was going in his direction.

Inside, there was a bench seat running along the side of the van behind the driver and another bench across the back. Sitting on the back bench was a hippie who did not say a word to him as he entered. Bill sat on the side bench behind the driver. They drove down the road in silence. After a while, Bill noticed that there was another man sitting to his left on the same bench. Since it was dark in the back of the van, it would have been easy not to notice another passenger. They soon struck up a conversation.

This other man began to explain to Bill what was about to happen in his life during the next few hours. He stated that it was the most serious and forthright discussion he had ever had in his life. The man asked him if he were willing to go through what was about to happen to him and he told him “yes, I’ll do it.” The man said back to him, “so you do understand what is about to happen?” Bill responded, “Yes.” All of a sudden, the van came to a

stop, the man asked one more time, "Are you sure you are willing to do this," and Bill responded, "Yes."

The man foretold him of a sequence of events that he would have to endure for this event to happen. He cannot remember what sequence he was informed of or why he was willing to go through them. When he responded back, the hippie said to him, "Who are you talking to?" The driver of the van also chimed in with his inquiry. Bill said, "To this man right here." When the driver turned on the interior light, there was no one sitting beside him. He was left with an odd feeling and disembarked the van.

They left him by the side of the road, and he began to walk away in the direction of his home. The van was barely out of sight when he turned around and saw a child on a bicycle peddling in his direction. Suddenly, a car came up behind the child, swerved with the intent to hit him, and missed because the child himself had swerved to miss a mud puddle. There was another person in the back seat who was holding a pipe out of the window. He swung the pipe at the child's head but he ducked and they missed him again. The pipe went over his head.

When Bill witnessed this, he stepped out into the road and waved his arms so the people in the car could see him. They then drove directly toward him. As they did, he then picked up a handful of gravel and threw it at their car. He does not know why he did this.

The driver slammed on the breaks and stopped the car. Three passengers exited the car and ran towards Bill. Bill tried to run away, but

since it was dark, he could not see clearly and he tripped and fell in the rough terrain. They caught up with him and started hitting him.

Two of them were hitting him with pipes. Then, he felt a tremendous instant pain and shock to his back and stomach at the same time. When he looked down and touched his hand to his stomach, he saw his hand was covered with blood. He looked up at them thinking he had been shot and said, "You've killed me." They stopped and ran away. He had actually been stabbed.

The Second Near-death Experience

Alone, in the dark, and bleeding to death, his body began to shake uncontrollably. The next experience he had was that he was looking down at his own body from a different vantage point and completely out of pain. When he looked around himself, he saw other people standing there. They were translucent and emitting a mild glow in the darkness. For a reason unknown to him, they told him to not go to the light.

When he looked up, he saw a brilliant beautiful light, which became his whole focus. It felt as if the light were made entirely out of love. As he focused on it, he found himself being pulled towards it face first in a gliding motion. He then experienced a tunnel effect. He proceeded through the tunnel and then stopped on the other side of it.

There was a male figure at the end of the tunnel who put his hand on his shoulder. In front of him was a tremendously beautiful orb of light,

wisdom, and understanding. He described himself as being totally absorbed by its presence. He felt absolutely no fear. The man was able to communicate to him through thought. Mentally, he was asked, "Are you ready for your life review?" He noticed that they were communicating with each other effortlessly without uttering a word. The communication was very clear and concise, and all took place through mental images.

Off to the left, he saw what appeared to be a town or city. When he looked at it, he felt himself moving towards it at an accelerating speed. As he moved towards the town, he began to re-live his life. However, he did not re-live his entire life. Embarrassing and personal situations were not re-lived. He did remember re-living situations that were the meaningful interpersonal experiences.

In situations where he had caused pain for others, he could feel their pain. He then felt bad about how his actions had caused another harm. Then, he would feel his own pain. However emotionally painful the review was, he wanted to do it. It all took place without judgment. There was no fear, he felt himself surrounded by love and acceptance. After the review, he found himself standing in front of the being of light and allowing himself to be filled with its love.

Off to the right of the being, he could see some unidentifiable structures. He did not know what they were. He was told that it was time to go off to the next place. At that moment, he found himself in the presence of

another being of light that would serve as a guide. It was a smaller light, like a flashlight that the emanated a feeling of love and understanding.

This guide escorted him to several very tall beings. He is 6'3" and he was looking up at them. There were 12 of them. They were very stoic and gave off no expression of feeling. They had large eyes, large heads, and no mouths. They were dressed in silver clothing and had high collars around their necks. Communication passed through their hands and they spoke to him of the past, present, and future. Each one had something different to add. He could not remember what they told him except for the last one.

The last entity gave him a reason for why he should return to life. He felt they were encouraging him to return. He was shown a situation in the future that would save another person's life. It was an image of a young man with his head back in pain. He had the impression that there was something wrong with his neck. They then told him that it was his son. He responded by saying, "You mean Erin?" Erin was his 6-month-old son at home. They told him no, that it was his other son. At that time, he had only one son. At that moment, he realized that he had go back into his body.

The Second Return and Reintegration

The next awareness he had, he was back in his body and trying to pull himself up to the road. The child on the bicycle was there asking if he could help. They were in the middle of nowhere. He told him to go off and get help. Shortly after he left, a car came by and took him to the hospital.

At the hospital, they discovered that the knife had punctured his lung and had cut half way through the portal vein leaving the liver. They said he was too weak to operate on and that he was going to bleed to death and they needed to know whom to call. He gave them his wife's telephone number. They told his wife that he was dying, and that he would be dead before she got there. Then, they left him on a table and periodically checked his pulse. However, he did not die.

His family showed up at the hospital shortly. When he saw his wife, he told her that he had been given a choice to live or die. She looked at him like he was out of his mind. He tried to tell other people of the experience, but they were not receptive. He was continually met with negativity each time he tried verbalize what happened to him. Therefore, he stopped talking about it.

Sometime later, a seminar was given in his town on near-death experiences. He attended the seminar and gained a sense of validation for his experience. From that point forward, he would not back down from anyone who tried to tell him his experience was not real. He found himself empowered to speak about his experience with conviction.

He did not experience personal changes immediately after the NDE. However, the changes gradually came upon him over the course of time. The NDE did not make life easier. He claims that it actually made it more difficult. The difficulty he had was in people relating to him. The reality of being here has changed for him.

His second son was born in 1978. Two years ago, that son was in a rodeo and was injured by a horse. His injuries were serious enough that he was taken to the hospital. While on the emergency room table, he was lying down with his head back. When Bill entered the room, he recognized the scene as the one he had been shown during his NDE.

The doctor was not sure if he had a fine fracture in his neck. He could not see it on the x-ray. His son decided to go back out to finish the rodeo. Bill told his son, "No, you are not." Never had he stopped his son from riding horses before, but he was going to stop him this time. He told him that he could be seriously injured if he went back out there in his condition. His son listened to him and did not go back out. He believes he saved his son's life.

He did not know if preventing his son's death was the only reason he was to come back or if it was part of it. However, since that experience with his son, his entire life changed. It was as if his near-death experience was given new meaning through his experience of a prophecy. He left his job in law enforcement and went into hospice work. He now visits the homes of seriously ill patients and takes over for the primary caregivers.

One time, he was working with an incapacitated man who had an inoperable brain tumor who could barely blink his eyelids. When his family was there, they talked about him in the past tense. He was unable to respond and would just lie there. Bill spoke to the nurse about his near-death experience.

The next time he came back, the man's wife was there, and she asked him about the near-death experience. The man was sitting in a wheelchair. He had been unresponsive from the time that Bill started working with him. Bill, however, had always spoken with him as if he could understand. He told her, in front of him, what happened when he died. She examined him with her eyes to see if he was telling the truth.

At that moment, the man with the tumor lifted his hands up from his lap. He had a distant stare in his eyes. Bill took his hand and the man brought his hand up to his mouth and kissed his hand. He died 6 hours later. It is possible that Bill's story help him to lose the fear of death.

As Bill has integrated the near-death experience into his life, he has found internal peace with himself. However, he is angry at the way things are headed in this country and around the world. He feels that religion is teaching people to fear God and they are behaving more selfishly than ever. He feels that his near-death experience has had a positive effect on his life by waking him up to universal love.

He has many animals on his ranch in Idaho such as donkeys, horses, dogs, cats, and pigeons. He reported his favorite was a dog named Star. One day, while outside, Star was hit by a car and mortally wounded. She dragged herself back to the house and was bleeding severely.

When he found her, he knew she was going to die. As she lay dying, he looked at her, and said, "I love you Star." She looked at him and wagged her tail. Bill saw a glowing multicolored light leave her and come right

towards him. As it passed through him, he felt a deep sense of love. It was a sparkling light that moved like a shooting star. The light was about the size of a softball. Right from her to him. He did not grieve for her death, for he understood death to be a transition and that life continues, although he missed her terribly. Her death was a special final moment of her sharing love with him that he said he would cherish forever.

Bill had an extensive scientific background in marine biology and then entered forensic science. He entered criminal justice as an assistance sheriff. He has a strong analytic background and considers himself a skeptic. He stated that if he had not had the experiences himself, he would never believe it from someone else. His personal experiences with NDEs have changed his whole perspective on life.

He left the Sheriff's Department on disability with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He could not take the hatred and the ideology any longer. He stated that the ideology in the criminal mind is "that if someone is stupid enough for me to be able to take advantage of them then they deserve to be taken advantage of." He went on to say that the police have the ideology "that if someone is stupid enough to be in this situation where I can take advantage of them, then they get what they deserve."

There was the same mentality on both sides, and he could not handle the stress of it any longer. Just after he left the force, he received a visitation from another officer with whom he had had frequent spiritual conversations. He had not seen him in 7 years. He came to him in a dream, and they

laughed and joked. Then, the conversation turned serious, and he got such a tremendous pain in his chest that he forced himself to wake up. When he woke up, the pain disappeared.

He went back to sleep, and again his friend entered the dream. They talked and laughed and again the conversation turned serious and he had another pain in his chest, only this time he held onto the pain until he could not take it any more.

The third time it happened he got out of bed to call his friend. His wife told him to wait until Sunday because it was so late and besides, the rates would be cheaper. When Sunday arrived, he received a call from a mutual friend who had some bad news. It was about the friend he had been dreaming of. The same morning he was having the dream of his friend was the morning that he died of congestive heart failure. His friend was in Michigan and Bill was in Idaho.

Bill stated that since his NDE, he has learned to listen to his internal voice more closely. He said that he has found its guidance to be valuable. There have been situations where he will associate with someone, even if he does not want to, because his internal voice will tell him that he needs to. When he listens, he finds that he is rewarded by the connection that he made. During the NDE, he learned that relationships were important in life. This is now reflected in his own internal voice, which guides him in establishing relationships.

He exemplified this idea through the following story. He met a man named Joe with whom he did not feel comfortable, but his internal voice told him that they had to become friends. The man was a severe alcoholic with Cirrhosis of the liver. One night Bill awoke with a lucid dream of Joe. Bill asked him if he had died and the man responded, "I don't know, I just know that I want a beer." He then proceeded to goad Bill into drinking a beer. Bill began to comply and then stopped and said, "Wait a minute, you are not going to use me to get drunk." He must have spoken aloud, for the commotion awoke his wife who asked him, "Who are you talking to?" He said it was Joe, and she wanted to know if he were dead. By this time, she had accepted the reality that he had unexplainable mystical experiences, usually about death. He responded that he did not know.

They went back to sleep and Joe came back. Joe started telling him things like he was afraid of going to the light and that he had killed people in Vietnam. The next day Bill went over to visit him. When he saw Joe, Joe said to him, "I suppose you thought I died last night, didn't you?" Bill said, "Yes." It turned out that Joe had become ill from drinking that night and was taken to the hospital unconscious. Bill asked him if he could remember anything from his unconscious state, and Joe only said he had a dream about many issues. He then said, "There is one thing I can tell you, and that is the only beer I could find was beer in green bottles."

The only beer in Bill's house was in the basement in a refrigerator and it was Micky's Beer, which comes in green bottles. Bill recounted for him

what he could remember from his lucid dream. Joe then remembered the experience and subsequently stopped drinking.

The NDE helped Bill to achieve greater understanding in his life. As a child, he avoided church. His family was conservative Presbyterian. At the time just before the near-death experience, he was an atheist. He said that he still does not believe in God the way it is taught in religion. God is not a separate entity outside of ourselves ruling over us. Instead, God is a compilation of all that exists. He went on to state, "That which it is, I am and that which I am, it is. He is us and we are him."

He believes in and stated he "knows" that there is a Creator. He said that the Creator is the source of all love, wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. "That which it is I am and that which is me will continue to survive and live beyond the death of the body." "We have a symbiotic relationship going on with these bodies. When the body dies, I will continue on, I know that. I have known that since it happened."

He has fears of how he is going to die, but not death. He does not want to die in pain. He is afraid that people have no understanding what the Creator is.

People are being tricked; I had freewill throughout the entire thing. I had the freewill to get into that experience, I had the freewill to come back. Religion seems to want to take freewill away from you. They want to take back what was given to you. They want you to commit your soul. The Creator would never want you to commit your soul. The whole thing about the Creator is that you have freewill that you are a free thinking, free experiencing being.

Bill stated that we are here to experience life and to be in service to others. We are spiritual beings in these human bodies intended to have a human experience. We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. He feels that the NDE took away the mystery for him of what happens after death. He feels that we are not meant to know what happens after death while we are still here in the human form. The ignorance allows us to have the full human experience. The limited knowledge allows us to be more creative.

He can now see love in everyone. He wishes he could remember what the 12 beings had to say to him. He would like to remember in better detail what happened. He was curious why the people at the beginning of the NDE told him not to go to the light. He went to the light anyway and it was not the wrong thing. They seemed to be wrong. They seemed to be out of their bodies, but not into the tunnel. It felt to him that they were not accepting the love in themselves, and they were afraid that God would not accept them because of the things they had done wrong in their lives.

I believe the Creator needs the knowledge that those people have because as I saw that orb of light, I presumed that through experience we are helping the creator grow through our knowledge and understanding. If we have a bad experience we can look at it in the light of love of the creator then we better understand and we grow through that. I am afraid that religion makes people afraid to face God, because they have been taught that God is vengeful and spiteful and can order you out into hell. I never got any impression of hell.

Bill told a story of his days at the Sheriff's Department where they were housing a hit man for the Mafia. The prisoner received a life sentence but

was under protection because there were contracts out on his life. He was convicted and sentenced to life for killing his wife. Witnesses said he walked into a bar and pulled his wife's head out of a bag and said, "I'll take a whiskey and give the bitch whatever she wants."

While interviewing the hit man, he revealed that he had had surgery and had left his body during the operation and saw a bluish light. As he came closer to it, he grew colder and became frightened. He refused to go to the light because it frightened him. Bill feels that he experienced the light as cold because at that time he was not able to see the love in himself. He felt that it was this man's fear of God that kept him from the light.

Laverne

The Physical Separation

Laverne is 28-year-old rapid eye movement therapist who lives in Idaho. The interview was conducted by telephone at her home. She reported that she was 21 when she had the near-death experience. It happened during a hospital stay while she was being treated for anorexia. At the time of the NDE, her weight was down to 76 pounds. She stated that her body was just too weak to maintain life. During her hospitalization, there were several occasions on which she felt she was about to leave her body.

She told the nurses that she felt like she was dying, and they responded by coming in and taking away all of the sharp objects in her room.

They interpreted her statements as a suicide threat. She knew that she was beginning to slip away, and when it happened, she just went to sleep.

The Near-death Experience

She remembers a feeling of weakness followed by her closing her eyes and then feeling herself leave her body. Her experience began by her finding herself conscious and alone in a dark and frightening tunnel. She said that it was a dark, scary, and disorienting place. There was no light; it was a total void. She found it difficult to talk about the initial experience of the NDE during the interview, since the mere discussion of the tunnel brought up feelings of anxiety. She was afraid of the dark, which made the experience all the more difficult.

At the end of the tunnel, she saw a light. She described it as a living light. When she entered into it, she felt a profound peace and a separation from her physical body. She felt light and free and described her thinking during the experience as very clear. She was aware of a separate luminous light being who was in her presence. This being was a guide who was present for her during the entire NDE.

Laverne recalled that off to her left was an area intended for a life-review, and she moved in that direction. However, she was not able to recall much of the experience now. During the life review, she was allowed to remember certain things about her life. She was not shown her entire life,

just relevant pieces. From time to time in the present day, she recalls occasional scenes from the life review that she had forgotten.

After she experienced the life review, she recalled being asked if she would like to go into the conference room. She responded by saying yes. She encountered several very tall beings in that room. These beings were gray, with big eyes and small mouths. They reminded her more of extraterrestrials than light beings. She stated that she felt a sense of being soothed while she was in the presence of the tall beings.

She remembered standing before each of the beings, and each one had something different to tell her. While she was with these beings, they explained to her the reasons she had had certain experiences in her life. They helped her to understand her life better.

She was taken back to a time when she had no will to live. They took her back in her memory so that she could remember specific life situations that would help her make positive changes in her life. She recalled the presence of several beings, but she did not remember how many there were.

The Return and Reintegration

She had been anorexic since she was 4 years old. She was told by one of the beings that she had to experience this in order to help others. She was told that when she returned, she would be able to recover from the anorexia. Since then, she has actually recovered from anorexia. It took 5

years. During that period, she would have occasional dreams at night where she would receive more information on what she needed to do to get better.

She did all of this on her own without medical or mental-health treatment. Now, she holds classes where she teaches those bits of information that were given to her. She feels that it is important to reach out and help as many people as possible. Her experience left her with a strong desire to be in service to others.

She was told about Rapid Eye Therapy by the beings when she was in the conference room. They told her how it worked and that she would eventually be practicing it for treating others. She was told that she would be led to it when she was ready. It took 6 years before she found someone who could teach her the technique. Soon afterwards, she began working with it. She now has a practice based on Rapid Eye Therapy, which shares some similarities with EMDR. It is a technique used to help individuals heal emotional injuries.

She grew up in an alcoholic home and eventually married an alcoholic. She found herself in a repetitive pattern of being in relationships with alcoholics. After the near-death experience, she realized that she could break that pattern. Since that time, she ended her codependent relationships with alcoholics and made other changes that allowed her to become a more differentiated individual.

The changes that she made because of the near-death experience made it easy for her to walk away from bad relationships. She felt as though

she has been guided in the right direction. She found the changes easy to make. Her beliefs about life have changed greatly since the NDE. Since the experience, she has felt much more self-confident. She stated that she now knows what happens after death. She now has no fear of death.

She also realized that she chose to be here and was not sent here against her will by some outside force. By realizing that she chose to be here, she claimed to have become much more accepting of herself. She is also much more accepting of life in general. She no longer views herself as a victim, but as a conscious and willing participant.

Before the experience, she was locked in an ongoing battle with her mother. Since the experience, she and her mother have become good friends. She harbored resentment towards her mother for bringing her into the world and consequently into situations she did not want to be in. Since her experience, she realized that she was the one who chose to come here. As a result, she has been able to release blaming her mother.

She tried to tell her doctors of her near-death experience, but they told her that because she was on so many medications she was probably hallucinating. After that, she did not tell anybody about her NDE. The reason she did not tell her story was that she did not want to be verbally attacked by those who would not understand or accused of making up the story as a means of seeking attention. When she finally told people of her experience, they looked at her incredulously. However, the dramatic changes that took

place in her life since the NDE helped to back up her story, and people were not so critical.

For years she was agoraphobic and did not leave the house, which is why the tunnel experience was traumatic for her. Since the NDE, she leaves her home normally and gives lectures and workshops on the topic.

Before the near-death experience, she believed in a literal interpretation of the Bible. She was a fundamentalist and believed that if one did not follow the commandments, one would go to hell upon one's death. She was divorced before her NDE and had broken other commandments and felt that she was definitely going to go to hell. During her near-death experience, none of that seemed to matter. She did not remember the commandments being an issue, nor did she have the sense of being judged. She no longer holds onto any issues of fearing God's judgment. She feels a closer relationship to God and to all of life because of the NDE.

She now believes that souls have a yearning for experience. The earthly experience satisfies that yearning. She feels that we are an extension of our Creator and that we have a choice of experiencing good things or bad things. She feels that in the end, everything equals out. While she was having the NDE, she experienced the idea that there may be variations of hell that some individuals experience, but not in the biblical sense as taught in religions. She understood hell to be an erroneous perception that an individual might have as being separated from spirit.

She feels that she is much kinder to people as a result of her experience. She was bitter and angry at the world before the NDE. She does not feel that way now. She used to be very intolerant of others and has since become more tolerant. She now looks at things through the eyes of love and finds that she is much more accepting of others.

Before the experience, she did not want to live. Now, she works on improving the quality of life for herself and others. She is able to let go of little arguments that do not mean much. She stated that life is a precious thing, and she wants to make the most of it.

Robert

The First Physical Separation

Robert was interviewed by telephone at his home in a small town in Kentucky. He is a 39-year-old national sales representative for machinery and has claimed to have had three near-death experiences during his adult life. He had his first experience at the age of 24 in 1984. The second took place in 1990 when he was 30, and the third happened in 1997 at the age of 37. Robert had the most difficulty of all of the interviewees remembering the actual NDE experience. However, the resulting affects of his experiences were similar to the others.

The first happened when he was hauling hay in 1984. His brother had given him a hat as a Christmas present the year before and he was wearing it that day. While he was in the back of the truck, it blew it off his head and

landed in the street. He told the driver what happened, and then jumped off the truck to find it. The driver did not realize that he had jumped off the back of the truck and began to back the truck up. Robert found the hat on the road and bent down to pick it up when he was knocked down by the truck and fell behind the oncoming wheel.

He looked up and saw the wheels coming at him. He was convinced he was not going survive, and in the moment just before he was run over by the rear wheel, he felt himself leave the body. From the vantage point of being out of his body, he witnessed the wheels run him over. He thought of his wife and baby alone in the world without him, and that called him back into his body. Shortly after the accident, an ambulance arrived and took him to the hospital, where he recovered.

The process of leaving his body felt like a powerful and sudden suction pulling him out. He felt a sensation of release when he left his body. He reported that he began to feel a sense of total oneness with everything as the experience progressed. It felt to him as if he had entered a state of universal consciousness.

The Second Physical Separation

The second experience took place in 1990 when Robert and several of his friends were exploring what was considered to be a haunted house. They were getting boisterous while up on the third story of the so-called haunted house and were yelling out, "We're going to get you, ghost." Suddenly, he

claims to have felt a presence push him through two floors to the bottom floor. He landed by hitting his head and causing his skull to fracture.

During the ambulance ride, his EKG flatlined, and he had his second NDE. This time, he was able to look down on himself lying in the ambulance. He was able to see the driver and the other individuals in the ambulance and began to realize that he was able to hear their thoughts and had a general knowledge of their past and future.

Robert claimed that he was able to feel each of their emotions. It felt to him as if they were all one consciousness. He began to feel how little he was in the scheme of things, yet he was also able to sense that he was an important part of life as well. As he felt his senses moving out and away from the ambulance scene, he felt as if he were becoming a part of a total consciousness. He reported that his thinking was clear the entire time he was out of his body. He was brought back to his body by the sudden shock of the fibrillation machine, which restarted his heart.

The Third Physical Separation

The third NDE took place in 1997, while Robert was hunting with family members in a local field. They were chasing a rabbit, and his brother-in-law took a different path during the chase. While they were running, he sensed a sudden blinding white light and a presence standing behind him that caused every hair on his body to stand on end. The being seemed to take over his body. For an unknown reason, he reached behind himself and with one arm

grabbed his 12-year-old nephew, and pulled him behind his body as if to shield him from something. At that moment, it felt as if a sledgehammer hit him. He then heard silence and dropped to his knees.

What happened was that his brother-in-law, who was ahead of him, tripped and fell with a loaded shotgun, and it went off as he fell. Robert was shot in the face with the shotgun, and his body had protected his nephew, who would have been killed had he not been pulled behind him. The shot hit him in the face and went through his neck. His entire face was peppered with shot; however, the shot missed both of his eyes completely. Again, he briefly felt himself leave his body and return.

The Return and Reintegration

Each of his NDEs felt like a brief experience to him. However, he stated that each successive experience seemed to fill him with a greater understanding and knowledge of life that defied explanation. He remembered having had a brief life review during each experience. He does not recall a light or visually seeing another being; however, he remembered that during each of the life reviews, an outside consciousness explained to him the reason why he had certain experiences in his life. This consciousness also explained the concept of God to him as a collection of all consciousness.

At the time of his first near-death experience, Robert was a Southern Baptist, as was the rest of his family. Immediately after the experience, he

left the church. He no longer agreed with their concept of God. He now saw God as an all loving and accepting collection of consciousness. After his experience, he felt that all life was one, and our collective makeup was the consciousness of God.

The NDE that he experienced in the ambulance was the longest of the three. At that time, he reported having experienced a sense of total consciousness. He found himself accepting the entire experience and not questioning anything while it was happening. He felt a desire to cooperate with the process of the experience.

Robert reported that the life reviews were a contradiction, being both brief and extensive at the same time. He described the life reviews as happening in the moment of a flash; however if he tried, he could remember the details of each scene that he was shown. During his experience, he stated that time and space seemed to not exist.

He was shown some situations of his past that he was ashamed of. He felt that by reviewing those scenes, it helped him to be a better person when he returned. However, he did not review his entire life. Each time Robert had a life review, it would go over particular highlights of his life. The life review of the second NDE seemed to be the longest and most detailed.

He was also shown why he went through each step of his life during his life reviews. Because of his life review experience, he claimed that he gained an understanding that everything in a person's life happens for a reason and that they are supposed to apply what they have learned from their

experiences as they progress in their lives. This understanding allowed him to be more accepting of others. It has given him the perspective that everyone is on a path of personal development and that we are meant to learn from all situations.

At the time he was run over by the truck, Robert wanted to do something different with his life. He was tired of being a day laborer and felt that he was going nowhere in his life. Right after the NDE, he took advantage of an opportunity to change his career and went back into the Navy where he was given a new position in computer training. The new position had more status than his original position in the Navy, and far more status than that of a day laborer. He was one of 12 people who were chosen to be in the new program.

He credited his near-death experience with helping him in becoming a more spiritual person. Since his NDE, his ideas about religion have completely changed. After his NDE, he began to feel that all religions contained truth. He stated that all people need spiritual experiences in their lives and that it is important for people with similar ideas to come together and share those ideas. However, he feels that most religions are prejudicial and do a disservice when they are used to close peoples minds. He felt that religions define themselves by excluding others. He feels that this is wrong. They also tell people that they are not going to heaven if they do not share the same beliefs. Again, he feels this is wrong.

He believes that the word "God" is an acronym for "Gathering of Deities." God, according to Robert, is an accumulation of all consciousness. He stated that he felt that each of us serve as the eyes and ears of God. We are constantly evolving. He accepts people for who they are, stating that everyone has a path to follow.

He has found himself becoming optimistic since the near-death experiences. He now recognizes within himself a desire to be of service to others. This is not something that he consciously chose. Rather, it developed in him without his awareness initially. He would just find himself in situations being more generous with others than he was accustomed to. He was not a generous person before his first near-death experience.

Robert began to improve the relationship with his mother after his near-death experience. She had a bi-polar disorder and was hospitalized at different times for long periods during his childhood. He was ashamed of her for her disorder and he was angry with her for her abandonment of him as a child.

After his NDE, he began to have more acceptance of her. He stated that his own experiences with the life reviews have helped him to understand that his mother had her own path that she needed to follow. He was consequently able to feel more compassion for her. He stated that had he not had the near-death experience he would not have made the effort to become closer to his mother.

Robert stated that he was not afraid of anything since his NDE. The only fear he was left with after his NDE was that he wanted to be able to accomplish more before he died. He also wanted to be able to speak with his daughter and stepson on the same level as he was talking to the interviewer about his experience. He felt that that would probably not happen due to where they were in their own spiritual development at that time.

Since his NDE, he has had the feeling that he is supposed to go out and teach, although he is not sure what he is supposed to be teaching. It just developed in him as a feeling. He wants to know if he has been given any talents because of the NDE that he is not aware of. He is not sure how to go about uncovering that type of information.

Chapter 4

Themes, Summaries and Conclusions

Rites of Passage

All of the individuals interviewed appear to have experienced the three phases in a rite of passage described by Van Gennep (Turner, 1982, p. 24). All of these individuals experienced a separation from their bodies. They also experienced a separation from their environments. They found themselves in an otherworldly experience far different from the one they experienced in their day-to-day lives.

All of the individuals found themselves redirecting their attention away from physical reality. Steven, Sally, Marco, Kimberly, and Laverne all found themselves in a dark void or tunnel before embarking on their near-death journey. For each one of them, it was a traumatizing experience. The darkness at the beginning of their experiences created for them an intense sense of separation from life and reality. They experienced an overwhelming sense of alienation. It is interesting to note that by the end of their experiences when they returned and reintegrated each felt more connected to life and God than at any other time in their lives.

The Initial Phase of Separation

This initial phase of the experience dramatized for them their alienation from life. As for a rite of passage, this would mark the initial phase of

separation. The experience exaggerated their senses of aloneness in the world, causing each one of them to recognize their personal longing and desire for connection to others. In order for them to understand true connection, they first had to understand true disconnection.

This true disconnection was created in the darkness at the beginning of their NDEs. They were utterly alone and in some form were forced to call out for connection to another. Their calls were answered, but only after their desires for connection were recognized within themselves. They each descended into Joseph Campbell's dark world of the hero and faced their ordeals only to return to the surface world with a gift for humankind.

Three interviewees did not experience a dark void at the beginning of their NDEs. Bill, Tom, and Robert began their experiences in the presence of others. However, it may be noted that Bill's experience began in the back of a dark van speaking to a stranger he could not see. Tom's began not with people but with doves. He was alone in the hospital room. Robert's experiences began with sensing the presence of another being who was either made up of or surrounded by white light.

The Second Phase of a Liminal State

As the experience continued, all of the people interviewed progressed into the second phase of a rite of passage. They all entered a liminal state, or a state of in-between statuses. They all had a sense of not being in their bodies and being away from the physical world from which they came.

However, they were not yet a part of the world they found themselves in, nor were they allowed to remain in the place that they entered. They were in a state of physical and social limbo.

Five of the eight people interviewed experienced direct visual contact with ritual leaders while they were in the liminal state. The ritual leaders appeared as light being guides who were present for them throughout their journey. Neither Tom, Sally, nor Robert reported direct visual contact with guides; however, they all reported experiencing the presence of another during their experiences.

Tom experienced the doves on either side of himself, and Sally experienced the presence of her mother. Robert experienced the presence of another being during each of his NDEs and the presence of a being during his life reviews. All people interviewed stated they felt the presence of the Creator and felt surrounded by a powerful unconditional love at all times during their experience.

All of these individuals experienced a personal and profound spiritual awakening during their experience during the second stage of their NDE. All claimed to have been clear in thought. All related their experience from a clear memory. Those parts that were hazy tended to be the same for each one. The hazy parts came when they try to recount the exact conversation they had with their guides or what they viewed in the life review experience. All of these individuals experienced an ecstatic state of peace during their NDE.

During the liminal stage, they experienced a variety of phenomena such as life reviews, prophecies of the future, revelations of history, and cures for illnesses. It was in this phase that some reported an intensification of color and sound. Some of the experiencers reported having seen colors that do not exist in our reality. For some, color and sound began to lose their boundaries and began to blend. Marco reported the sensation of “hearing” color during this phase.

For some, life reviews were experienced during this phase. Those who did experience the life review noted that they did not experience a review of their entire life. Rather, they experienced important highlights of their life during the review. The important interpersonal experiences were most experienced during the reviews. In none of the cases did the interviewee feel judged during the life review. In fact, each individual felt surrounded by a sense of unconditional love. They wanted to have the review. The life review is a moment of contemplation for the individual. It is as if the life review is emphasizing the importance of interpersonal relationships and being of service to others.

The life review may be akin to a great dream within the power dream of the NDE that signals the readiness of the initiative to enter the third stage in a rite of passage. Jung describes “big” dreams as those that “employ numerous mythological motifs that characterize the life of the hero, of that greater man who is semi-divine by nature” (Jung, 1974, p. 79). Those that

had the life review were ready to reintegrate into society with a chosen new career in service to others.

The Third Stage of Reintegration

Entering into the third stage of a rite of passage, reintegration, all of these individuals were integrated into society, changed by a deeper level of intimacy with their world. They all returned to society with new insights from their experiences. All feel as if they were touched by the divine. They had experienced a new relationship to life, and they brought back with them a gift from the divine. A sense of oneness with everything and a desire to be in service to others.

Every one of the individuals interviewed made a spiritual transformation as a result of having had their NDE. The NDE, for them, was the spiritual rite of transformation. Those who were dogmatic let go of some of their rigid beliefs. They became more open to and respecting of others, and found themselves turning away from their organized religion. Those who were atheists or agnostic found themselves becoming more accepting of spiritual reality. These individuals came to believe in a creator or God and found themselves delving into a richer spiritual life. Those with beliefs on opposite ends of the spectrum appeared to move towards each other after having had their experience. They all lost their fear of death. All but Steven lost the fear of God.

All of the individuals interviewed changed their religious perspectives with the exception of Tom. They left the dogmatic teachings of organized religion and began to follow a more self-directed spiritual path. This change in religious affiliation is another way of observing their change in status within society after having had the near-death experience.

Steven, Tom, Marco, Kimberly, Bill, Sally, Robert, and Laverne all expressed that their near-death experience caused them to make personal changes in their lives. There was a general feeling that the experience re-directed them to a different path in life. Having had their experiences, they made different life choices. Those who experienced life reviews appeared to have had an easier time making changes in their life styles.

All of the people who were interviewed experienced a spiritual and emotional transformation that they attributed to their near-death experiences. I propose that the near-death experiences reported by all of these individuals fell within the definition of a rite of passage and that all of these people were truly transformed by their experience. They all referred to this experience as a pivotal experience in their lives.

Life Reviews and Judgment

Among the general population today there is a widely held cultural myth that our lives may be judged by the heavens on the actions that we take. The myth is promoted in literature and entertainment with a preponderance of good overcoming bad and saving the day. The subtext of

these stories implies that the universe supports right action and not wrong action. In order for right action to be supported, a judgment must take place to discern what is right and what is wrong. This pervasive belief has subtly settled into our cultural consciousness. Whether or not individuals believe it as an official spiritual value, they respond to it somewhat on the cultural level.

Everyone knows the joke about waiting for lightning to strike an individual who has taken what is considered wrong action. Most people will laugh as a defense against even the slight possibility that it might be true even if their religion does not support such a belief. Somewhere in the back of our minds, we wonder if it might be true. This appears to cut across all religious lines. It is a cultural belief, not a religious belief. The popularity of movies such as *Defending Your Life* and *BeetleJuice* reveal our cultural obsession with being judged in the afterlife.

When a comment is made about people seeing their lives flash before their eyes, culturally we understand this to mean that they have had a close brush with death. It is not officially taught in any Bible-based religion; it is pervasive in the culture and is absorbed by being out in the culture. Along with that understanding is another belief that we will be judged in that moment our life flashes before our eyes.

The desire to avoid God's punishment can be a motivating factor for many people to adhere rigorously to their religions. Both historically and in the present, there have been cultures that sacrifice or make offerings to please a god or goddess so as not to evoke their punishment. One only

needs to watch Sunday morning programming on television for modern examples of televangelists raising the specter of God's retribution for displeasing Him.

For centuries, those in power have exploited the fear of God's judgment and wrath within religions and governments to motivate and manipulate whole populations. It has been used by them to attain, retain, and extend their privileges and power. They do not want this belief to change. Without this belief, they would not be able to motivate others in the name of God through fear.

This myth is so deeply ingrained in the public consciousness that officials in congress felt it appropriate to state publicly that President Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky was a matter to be taken up between himself and his maker. The statement implied that one day he would be judged for his action. The belief that we may be judged by God on our past actions upon our death is very frightening.

The myth of the life review holds within it, no matter how small, some fear of being judged before God. Those who report having had a life review during their NDE proclaim the opposite to be true. The interviewees who experienced a life review during their NDE have come to understand it as simply a review and not a moment of judgment. The actual experience of a life review appears to have a profound effect on the individual beyond the actual experience. The experience of having a life review during the NDE seems to affect later spiritual and vocational choices.

Marco, Kimberly, Bill, Robert, and Laverne all experienced life-reviews during their NDEs. They stated that their life reviews were not reviews of their entire lives including the minutia, but rather a review of the more important relational experiences that they had. Each felt significantly moved by their life review experience. They were so moved that profound life changing decisions were made on account of the life review experience.

During the life review, they stated that they felt the presence of another being who was not shaming them, but holding them in love. This is in direct opposition to what is popularly expected during the moment of judgment. They related feeling a sense of total acceptance during their life review. There was no judgment with the exception of judging themselves. Even this judgment did not involve shaming. It involved understanding and assessing missed opportunities.

Those who experienced the life review may have gained firsthand experience with the mythology of the moment of being judged. Their experience of being surrounded by love and acceptance directly contrasted with the cultural belief of judgment and retribution. This in turn caused them to question and change their old beliefs of being judged by God. They let go of their old fears of being condemned by God for actions that displeased Him.

Those who did not experience the life review did not challenge the myth of being judged at the moment of death. Consequently, they held onto their old belief structures of judgment and condemnation. For these

individuals, their spiritual paths still contained a belief in possible condemnation.

Those who experienced the life review changed their entire perspective on being judged. They came to an understanding that they were not being judged in any manner. Rather, they were given an opportunity to assess for themselves situations involving their important interpersonal relationships. The life review stressed the importance of loving interpersonal relationships in their lives.

The review of these experiences impressed upon them the importance of loving interpersonal relationships through a visceral experience. During the review, they were able to experience how their actions affected another individual. They related that they were able to feel the actual pain of the other, and this brought home for them their interconnectedness with all people.

Results of the Life Reviews

All of the individuals who had a life review left their respective organized religion. They stated that their NDE was the reason for leaving. They felt that their churches were not presenting the concept of God accurately and were misusing their influence. In leaving their organized religions, they also left the dogma and were free to follow their own spiritual path. All of the individuals interviewed, with the exception of Tom, felt that their religions were too restrictive about the concept of God.

Steven and Tom did not have a life review and continued to hold onto their deeply ingrained belief about being judged by God and therefore held onto the dogmatic beliefs of their religions. Both of those individuals retained some form of fear of being judged by God. Although their perspectives on spirituality changed, their fear of God did not. They found themselves more open to others and new ideas as a result of their NDE experience; however, their motivation for doing the “right” action still contained elements of fear. Steven stated that he had lost his fear of death as a result of the near-death experience; however, he retained his fear of God.

All of the individuals in the study made significant changes in their personal lives as a result of their NDE. Some of the individuals retained the fear of God’s judgment, and others lost that fear. Since both groups made significant life improvements, it appears that losing the fear of God’s punishment does not lead one into a hedonist lifestyle. Rather, the experience of profound compassion they felt at a moment of vulnerability seems to have directed them down a path of sharing that compassion with others as well as with themselves.

Those who had the life review appeared to be more self-directed in doing what they considered the right thing. Their sense of obligation came from their connection to all life rather than a sense of obligation to God. They also stated that the personal changes that they implemented in their lives generally came very easily. They did not have to think consciously about them. Those that had the life-review tended to view God as a part of all of

life. Steven and Tom, however, retained the view that God existed as an entity outside of themselves.

Both Steven and Tom mentioned that they had a difficult time in applying the changes to their lives that they felt were asked of them by the NDE. They both mentioned that their experience of the NDE made life more difficult for them. They consciously tried to remain aware of their need to make different choices in life. They were conscious of each choice they made in regard to being more open and tolerant and in changing life style behaviors.

Absence of a Life Review

Through the NDE, Steven and Tom gained a sense of what they were “supposed” to do; however, they did not have the benefit of the life review that allowed them to view past missed opportunities in an air of acceptance and compassion. Consequently, they still associated the idea of being punished for not doing what they were “supposed” to be doing. Their motivation retained a sense of being directed from the outside by God, rather than from the inside through their own desires.

Both Steven and Tom retained some of the dogma of their respective religions. Their religions, fundamentalist Christianity, and Catholicism are both highly organized forms of spiritual belief with rituals and rules. Steven found himself delving deeper into the Bible, and Tom attended church more frequently after their experiences.

Fundamentalist Christianity and Catholicism both come from a perspective of glorifying struggle on earth. These are the terms in which Steven and Tom discussed the fundamental changes that they enacted as a result of their NDEs. For them, the changes they made were a burden and a struggle in their daily lives.

Presence of a Life Review

Marco's, Kimberly's, Bill's, Sally's, Robert's, and Laverne's behaviors and lifestyles changed as profoundly as Steven and Tom's, with the exception that they felt that their changes were made easily. They did not report feeling a struggle to make the changes, or to remain conscious of doing the right action. They stated that it just came about as a natural part of the changes that took place in their lives.

The experience of the life review, therefore, appears to have a profound effect on the spiritual views of an individual who experiences a near-death experience. However, the absence of the life review does not appear to have the opposite influence. The life review seems to affect dogmatically ingrained beliefs, whereas the absence of a life review does not cause one to become more dogmatic.

This may be observed in the case of Sally, who did not have a life review during her NDE. The absence of the life review did not cause her to become frightened of God nor feel burdened by the near-death experience.

She was neither religiously dogmatic or afraid of God at the time of her NDE and found herself even less so afterwards.

Career Changes

Overview

It is interesting to note that all of the individuals in the study who experienced a life review also experienced a vocational change inspired by their near-death experience. Marco, Bill, Kimberly, Robert, and Laverne changed from banker, police officer, concession-stand worker, day laborer and incapacitated adolescent, respectively, into hospice volunteer, home-care worker, entomologist, Navy computer trainer, and rapid-eye therapist following their NDEs. All of their post-NDE careers involved an increase in the level of service to others in positions that were more nurturing than those they held previously. Being of service to others helped them to satisfy a basic desire that appeared to develop as a result of their NDEs. They found a way of extending nurturing service to others while maintaining their lives financially. Being of service has become a focal point in their lives.

Those interviewed who did not have the life reviews did not change their vocations. They did, however, stress the importance of being in service to others. They chose to be in service to others by directing it towards their families and other people on an individual basis. Their service role was ancillary rather central to their careers.

It is interesting to note that neither of the individuals who experienced an NDE in childhood experienced a life review during their youthful first experience. Those individuals went on to become a forensic scientist and a banker, respectively. However, later in life, both of the individuals re-experienced a near-death experience accompanied by a life review. It was after this experience that both of these individuals changed their vocations to hospice workers. These individuals became intimately involved in care giving to those who were physically close to death.

Career Change as a Recognizable Change of Status

Because our society does not recognize the change in status for those who have experienced an NDE, it may be that those who experienced the life review may be more compelled to create that recognition from society by changing their vocation. One way of receiving recognition for a change in status in our society is to change one's vocation. Those who changed their vocations after the NDE received a new status in the eyes of society through their work.

Each individual, however, felt a personal change of status in their own eyes. Each one experienced a personal change that involved the way they related to society and life in general. They each saw themselves as a part of all of existence because of their near-death experience. They no longer viewed themselves as separate, isolated entities. They now held onto a new personal status as being an intimate and important part of all that exists.

The life review may have had some influence over vocational choice. However, all individuals after the NDE did stress the importance of more intimate relationships with others. All returned from their experience feeling changed as a consequence of their near-death experience.

NDE as a Bottoming-Out Experience

Addiction vs. NDE

The near-death experience may be closely aligned with what is commonly called a bottoming out experience. All of these individuals had reached a point in their lives where they were feeling a sense of stagnation, loss, and desperation. They desperately needed to make personal changes in their lives in order to feel a sense of movement forward. They viewed their NDE as a pivotal force in helping them to make that change. Many of them found that they were able to make changes in their lives after the NDE that they were not able to make before the NDE.

This is not unlike the bottoming-out one experiences through addiction. At some point in addicts' lives, they reach a place where they must either change their behavior or die. Like the bottoming-out experience of the addict, those who experienced the near-death experience were faced with the choices between changing or dying as well.

Steven, Tom, Sally, Marco, Kimberly, Robert, and Laverne had all reached a point in their lives where they were experiencing a state of stagnation in their lives. For them, their near-death experience gave them

the bottoming-out experience without the need of an addiction. Their bottoming-out experience effected for them a change that moved them into a healthier lifestyle.

Those experiencing an NDE are truly faced with a physical threat to their bodies. Alcoholics and near-death experiencers both give themselves into a higher power. In both alcoholics and NDErs, the aftermath of their experiences leads to a deeper understanding of life that did not exist before the experience.

Both experiences create a clarity that did not exist before the experience. That clarity and greater understanding can lead to life-altering patterns. The bottoming-out experiences of both addiction and the NDE direct people to travel on new and more fulfilling paths. All rites of passage are intended to set people on paths that are believed to be more fulfilling. Twelve-step programs have their own rites of passage to assist their participants in changing to a healthier lifestyle. The near-death experience, as a rite of passage, appears to do the same.

Many people in 12-step programs, organized self-help programs devoted to addiction recovery, will discuss their struggle for sobriety openly and with candor, in much the same way as Steven and Tom spoke of their struggle after their NDEs. The recovering addict must remain conscious of his or her behavior to remain sober. This was true for both Steven and Tom as well. They both mentioned having to remain conscious of the changes that they made in their lives in order for those changes to be integrated.

The alcoholic in recovery approaches life on a one-day-at-a-time basis. Both Steven and Tom referred to making the changes in their lives on a one-day-at-a-time basis. The recovery process also speaks of turning to a higher power for healing. All of those interviewed expressed a renewed motivation for turning to a higher power after their NDE.

Personal Bottoming-Out of Volunteers

Steven For Steven, the crisis leading to his near-death experience involved a personal conflict around issues of devotion to his family. He also felt that self-discipline was a problem for him and that he was badly overweight. He was highly critical and judgmental of others, which prevented him from having authentic intimate relationships.

After his NDE, he found himself more devoted to his children and wife. He also became more devoted to himself in the form of taking care of his health. He lost the weight and became more active. He found that he was more open to the views of others and began to place the emphasis on the relationship rather than dogma. He also lost his fear of death.

Sally The events in Sally's life that led up to the NDE revolved around feelings of being lost in the world, unloved, and frightened of life. She was in the Philippines nearing the end of her experience with the Peace Corps and was soon to return home. She had hoped that she would find herself while in the Corps.

After her NDE experience, she found more courage in life. She was less frightened of life's challenges. The experience helped her to lose her fear of death that in turn allowed her to be more daring. This was something that she was not able to do before the NDE. She felt that she had learned new and healthier ideals from her experiences in the Philippines and that the NDE reinforced her conviction with those ideals.

Tom For Tom, a personal crisis of judging others brought about his bottoming-out experience. He referred to himself as arrogant and condescending to others. It was a condition that left him in isolation and loneliness. Stuck in his views, nothing seemed to be able to shift into being a more open person.

His NDE help him to accomplish those changes. After the near-death experience, he found himself a more open person. He found himself able to communicate feelings with family members. This was something that he had always wanted to be able to do but was unable to before the NDE. He also found himself much less self-involved. As a result of his experience, he lost his fear of death.

Marco For Marco, material greed and a lack of self-love led to his crisis. He had wanted to make changes in his lifestyle, but was not willing to find the time or make the effort. He was caught up in a downward spiral of material greed to satisfy an emotional emptiness in his life.

As a consequence of his near-death experience, he was able to give up smoking and improved his diet. He had been unable to accomplish those goals before his experience; however, he made the changes without any effort after the NDE. He also let go of his materialistic ways and began to connect to people rather than objects. As a result, he felt a greater sense of emotional satisfaction in his life. Consequently, he lost his fear of death.

Kimberly Self-loathing and personal stagnation brought about Kimberly's crisis. She found herself on a downward spiral of drug use and self-destruction. The self-acceptance that she desperately wanted felt hopelessly out of reach for her. Her conflicting feelings of anger and fear with God felt unresolvable.

As a result of her NDE, she lost her fear of death completely. She easily and effortlessly ended her self-destructive patterns. She was able to achieve a sense of self-acceptance that once seemed so difficult to obtain. She was able to resolve her feelings of anger with God and came to see Him as a loving and nurturing entity.

Laverne Laverne's personal crises involved overcoming anorexia and anger. She was stuck in an unending pattern of blame and self-abuse. Her body could not take much more, and it was beginning to fail.

After her near-death experience, Laverne was able to make a drastic improvement in her interpersonal relationships. She found herself able to

break the cycle of abuse in her relationships and was able to leave bad relationships in which she formerly would have remained. She made amends with her mother and began to acknowledge and handle her anger.

Over the course of a few years, she was able to overcome anorexia. She began to take responsibility for herself and her actions, something she had never done before. Her debilitating agoraphobia had once prevented her from leaving the house, now she found herself able to leave and give lectures on her experience. Finally, she lost her fear of death.

Bill Bill's crisis came about from the emotional pressures of the police force. He found the anger and hatred on both sides of the law more than he could tolerate. It left him confused and severely depressed. He was later diagnosed with PTSD.

Bill's bottoming-out experience was different from the others. Where the others had experienced their NDEs at time of their deepest desperation, Bill did not. His NDE took place at a time in his life when he was busy and looking forward to the future. Therefore, he did not make or experience any personal change immediately after the NDE. He experienced no great revelations. The seeds of change were planted by the NDE into his subconscious and only realized years later during his darkest period of life.

Only after being in law enforcement and experiencing the emotional trauma that took him to the lowest point in his life was he able to integrate his near-death experience and change his life. It was the realization of the

prophecy that he received during his near-death experience that stimulated the change in his life. It validated his NDE for him. Immediately afterwards, he began to listen more closely to his internal voice. He left the police force. He lost his fears of death and began to do hospice work. He found himself becoming more accepting of others. He lost his fear of death.

Robert Robert found himself at his low point frustrated as a day laborer. To make matters worse, he was not finding any success at locating another job. If he were able to get another job, he quickly lost it. He was beginning to feel like a failure. He was now married, his wife was pregnant, and he felt desperate.

After his first NDE, his life completely changed. He found that where he was once unable to hold down a job, he was now successful in every job that he did. Right after the near-death experience, he received a call from the Navy offering him a position to train others on computers. He had no previous experience on computers, but was trained by the Navy because they felt that he would be good at teaching others. This was a turning point in his life. Never again did he have difficulty remaining employed.

Resolution of the Crisis

All of these individuals found themselves involved in a personal crisis that they had to overcome in order to move on in life. The near-death experience provided them with an opportunity to make personal changes that

would profoundly affect their lives. All of them felt that the results brought about by their near-death experiences added a significant quality to their lives. All felt that the near-death experience put them on a path towards a more fulfilling life.

They all credit their near-death experiences for helping them to become more spiritually open. Each one of them had reached a point of spiritual bottoming out at the time of the NDE. All of them referred to the near-death experience as a spiritual experience. That experience seemed to hold for them an answer to the spiritual crisis that they were facing at the time.

We are living in a world where our spiritual needs are continually ignored. Those entrusted with caring for those needs too often are corrupted by an ego-driven greed for power and money. Each time we become aware of the abuse of our trust, we become more cynical and drift further from spiritual fulfillment. In a world full of religions, we are still hungry for the spiritual.

Those people who have had an NDE found themselves back on a spiritual path. These individuals have each made remarkable changes in their lives as a result of their experiences. More than anything, they have experienced a spiritual rebirth. In this process, they have found themselves gaining respect and reverence for all of life. These are not just words to these individuals. They are the actions that they take in everyday life.

Childhood NDEs

Marco and Bill had both experienced NDEs as children. As children, they did not face the experience of the alienating darkness during their NDEs as they later would do as adults. Their childhood experiences did not contain the archetypal qualities of a rite of passage into spiritual maturity that were present for adults either. Bill was only 3 years old when he experienced his first NDE, and Marco was 7 and 13.

Bill was greeted by other children in a nonthreatening way at the beginning of his childhood NDE. Upon his “death,” he did not instantly become an adult. He played a game by himself in the presence of the other children which would be age appropriate. There were no life issues to be dealt with; there was no life review.

He found himself outside of his body, as some of the adults reported, observing his father’s resuscitation attempts. While this was happening, he felt no fear. Later, he reported that it just seemed perfectly normal for him to have such an experience. He was easily able to integrate it into his life and only later discovered that other children did not have such experiences.

Marco was 7 when he had his first NDE. What he was able to remember of it was that during the period he was unconscious, he felt a sense of warmth and safety. He felt no fear during this experience. He did not recall making any changes in his life at that time because of the NDE. The stages of a rite of passage were not observed during this experience.

This event did not appear to have been life changing for him, either. The experience was one of holding and containing for young Marco.

Marco was older than Bill when he experienced his second childhood NDE at 13. As an adolescent, Marco was experiencing issues of self-loathing; however, he was not yet an adult and experienced an NDE which seemed appropriate for his age. He too did not begin his second experience with any fear or feelings of isolation. After a brief, nonthreatening tunnel experience, he was aware of the presence of others. He did not experience a life review during this NDE. This experience did not appear to be a rite of passage into spiritual maturity, either. It did appear to assist him in making a more age appropriate passage into adolescence.

The experience assisted him in achieving a greater sense of self-acceptance, which helped him to survive his adolescence. During his NDE, he met with a distant relative, an aunt, whom he had never met in life. He experienced from her a sense of unconditional love and compassion unlike any he had experienced before that would assist him through adolescence. His encounter with her during the NDE gave him a feeling of being supported in his life. It was exactly what he needed to get through a very rough family situation.

Marco's second NDE came about during a childhood bottoming-out experience. His NDE was triggered by an attempted suicide. As an adolescent, he had reached the lowest point in his life during an abusive family situation. After the NDE, he was able to cope with his life better.

Rather than being told how to cope during the experience, the coping skills seemed to develop intuitively on their own. The feeling of the unconditional love that he experienced during the NDE stayed with him. It was something that he had never experienced in his own family situation, but what he received during the NDE was enough to get him through childhood.

Interestingly, both of these individuals experienced NDEs later as adults resulting from physically traumatic events. Marco had a heart attack, and Bill was stabbed. Both individuals were inspired to leave their respective careers for hospice work as a consequence of their near-death experiences. Both of these individuals claimed to be able to see the soul leaving the body upon death as a colored ball of light. Both individuals claimed to have gone through a metamorphosis that has allowed them extraordinary psychic abilities because of their experiences. Neither individual is aware of the other's existence. One lives in California and the other in Idaho.

Adolescent NDE as a Rite of Passage into Manhood

Jung describes the "big" dreams as those that "employ numerous mythological motifs that characterize the life of the hero, of that greater man who is semi-divine by nature" (Jung, 1974, p. 79). These dreams often contain adventures that are dangerous, ordeals involving initiation, or both. He states that the reason children have such dreams is that they have

personalities that are still in the stage of developing. Due to this lack of development, they are striving to become differentiated individuals, and this becomes manifest in their dreams.

Marco had this archetypal big dream experience when he was 13 through his NDE. He found himself walking through gates which symbolized his entering a new world. The old man he met was reminiscent of Merlin, the archetypal wise old man who led him through the adventure. Merlin is "the magician as teacher and guide of souls. He is comparable...to the guru" (Snider, 1991, p. 39). This Merlin image was also a trickster whose intention is to create a new order by creating disorder. The new order is one of balance and wholeness. "As the archetypal Wise Old Man, he symbolized the whole person -- the Self" (p. 30).

By listening to the Merlin inside, he was guided to the point in his life where he completed his balance between the anima and animus. The routine of his abusive family needed to be shaken to allow him to follow the guidance of the Merlin inside. The intent of the trickster is to create new possibilities.

The old man represented Marco's own internal animus. Marco also met with a woman who was a relative. This anima character was nurturing and supportive. This NDE allowed Marco to integrate the anima and animus of healthy images that were not available to him in his own home life. The experience taught him to trust in himself through his intuition from the anima and the assertion of the animus.

It was after this experience that Marco, as an adolescent, began to leave childhood and old childish ways. Marco no longer viewed suicide as a solution to his problems. His temper calmed down, and he learned how to finesse distasteful situations at home. The changes that took place in Marco after this experience were similar to those changes one might expect after an adolescent's rite of passage into manhood. Marco's NDE experience may have been more closely related to a rite of passage into manhood rather than a rite of passage into spiritual maturity.

As required for a rite of passage into manhood, there must be a witness. For Marco, this witness was his grandmother. She validated his experience/adventure by warning him never to speak of the woman he saw in the NDE. Her warning and emotional response to the woman showed Marco that the experience had meaning for his grandmother also. According to Jung, the holding of a secret childhood dream can have a very powerful influence on the development of a character (Jung, 1974, p. 123). The holding of a secret adds sacredness to the experience and its contents. The NDE could therefore be recognized as a meaningful and mystical experience.

Differentiation through the NDE

The Secret

All of the individuals who interviewed with NDEs related how they had kept their experience secret at some point. For all of them, the withholding of their experience from others gave unintentional sacredness to their NDE. In

the holding of the secret, it became a lesson in privacy and self-control. It may have fostered a respect for the privacy of their own thoughts and beliefs.

Self Care

These individuals had reached a point in their lives where they had lost a measure of respect for themselves before the NDE. It was evidenced in the way they took care of their bodies, in the way they related to others or both. The holding of their secret allowed them to gain a sense of renewed respect for their own private thoughts and experiences. It involved a new self-respect that allowed them to make changes that were more positive in their life.

They began to take care of their bodies by creating for themselves a healthier lifestyle. They began caring for their emotional well being by becoming differentiating from others. They had a sacred and secret experience that no one could take away from them. They truly felt touched by the divine, and this gave them a new sense of empowerment in their lives.

The Dark

According to Jung, the dreams of the very young are filled with a symbolic content that are often connected with symbolism for the differentiation process (Jung, 1974, p. 77). The near death experiences of these individuals assisted them in their own differentiation process. Due to their lack of development, they were striving to be differentiated individuals,

and this became manifest in their near-death experience. Jung describes the first dream as an initiation "into the secrets of the earth . . . it was an initiation into the darkness. . . intellectual life had its unconscious beginnings at that time" (Jung, 1989, p.15).

The NDE shares some of the elements of Jung's first dream concept. Four of the people interviewed began their NDE surrounded by total darkness. As Jung stated, they were initiated into the darkness literally. It was a moment of great fear for these individuals. Yet, it was a pause in the initiation. Like the quiet in a darkened theater before the rising of a curtain, the darkness they experienced drew their full attention to what was about to happen. Something important was about to take place.

In their aloneness in the dark, they became the shadow. Their beingness felt hidden from others. Alone in the darkness, like shadow material, they appeared to be disowned from life. This was probably their greatest lesson in life. They felt an alienation from all life that underscored for them at that moment their true desire and need for connection. It is their desire for and understanding of that connection to life that drives them today in their everyday lives. Like the myth of Anna, who was saved from imprisonment by the dirt from her fingernails, what would appear to be a worthless experience of darkness actually rescued those people from their own sense of alienation.

The darkness also becomes a metaphor for the unconscious. The individual leaves the physical body and enters into the world of the

unconscious. The unconscious is no longer experienced as a separate existence outside of the individual; rather the individual becomes the unconscious. They find their existence in a state of nothingness.

This would also be the ultimate state of undifferentiation. There is no perceived other from whom to differentiate. The content of the first dream contains symbols of differentiation, according to Jung. The content present for those who experience darkness during the NDE was nothingness. What is missing during the initial experience of the NDE is any symbol at all. The nothingness, therefore, becomes the symbol. It becomes the symbol for what is missing. What is missing is an other and the experience of differentiation that is derived from that. The absence of the symbols drew attention to those very symbols.

Two individuals reported a symbolic struggle between the darkness and the light. They witnessed the light pushing back the resistant darkness. The light became the symbol of consciousness and awareness. The darkness represented unawareness. The light of awareness filled that place where only a void once existed.

Containing the Opposites

The struggling described between the darkness and the light contains within it the symbolism of the opposites. The light and darkness are pushed up against one another in stark contrast. Their very struggle invokes a sense of tension. Neither individual said that darkness was destroyed. They

stated that it was pushed back. It continues to exist outside of the boundaries of light.

As an individual grows, he or she must learn to contain the tension of the opposites. Opposites are a condition of life that must be dealt with. This tension was symbolically played out before their eyes as the battle between dark and light. What was experienced at that point was a trinity. There was the darkness, the light, and the observing individual. The trinity is a symbol for the whole. Wholeness or oneness with everything is what all of these individuals reported experiencing during their near-death experiences.

It appeared to those individuals that they entered the light with the darkness lurking just beyond its boundaries. However, they were no less a part of the darkness than they were of the light. The individuals contained both. Somehow, they found a way to contain the tensions of the opposites and found peace. Finding peace with the opposites allowed them to feel their wholeness.

Awareness of Mysteries

Three of those who experienced the darkness also experienced an initiation into the secrets of the earth. They mentioned that after their experience in the darkness, they were shown everything since the beginning of time. They were temporarily given the awareness of all knowledge. As

with Jung's first dream, these individuals symbolically and literally experienced an awareness of the greater expansiveness of life.

Five of the individuals remembered having had conversations with others that divulged information that heretofore they had not been aware of. This divulging of information symbolizes that there are mysteries in life. The awareness that there are hidden things to be revealed creates a mystery. Their losing of most of the information they received once the individual recovered from their trauma only intensifies the experience of the mystery.

Each of these individuals returned to physical reality with an awareness that there was more to know by virtue of having had a direct experience with the lost knowledge. It appears that having the awareness that there are mysteries in life is more important than the actual uncovering of the mysteries. Having a mystery creates a sense of awe for life. It is an awe for life that each of these individuals returned with. Returning with an awe for life gave them a renewed respect and appreciation for life.

It may be added that whether or not an individual had an experience of conversing with someone during his or her NDE, the NDE itself was an awe-inspiring experience. All of the individuals interviewed displayed some form of emotion when reporting their experience. All of the interviewees reported that the experience was a powerful pivotal point in their lives. All of the interviewees felt profoundly changed by having had the experience. All of the interviewees made significant, remarkable, and verifiable changes in their lives as a result of having had an NDE. All of the interviewees reported a

change in their spiritual beliefs from one of being closed to a more open and accepting view of others.

The changes that they made were deeply personal and of a lasting nature. The people interviewed came from California, Idaho, Oregon, and Kentucky and came from Christian backgrounds varying from fundamentalist to agnostic. They included men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals. The precipitating events varied from organ breakdown to attempted suicide to attempted murder. It is interesting to note that each person came away from the experience with the same conclusions; life continues after death, our life's task is to be in service to others, and loving involvement with interpersonal relationships was the most important reason for being here.

The interviewees credited their NDE with changing the course of their lives. They felt that the NDE helped to divert them from a self-destructive path and put them on what they felt was the right course. Rites of passage help to place individuals on the right path as governed by their culture.

NDEs involve three stages: separation, liminality, and reintegration. They often involve a symbolic death and rebirth, and they involve the initiate's perceived self-transformation into a new phase of life. All of these elements were present for those interviewed having had an NDE. Whether or not the near-death experience is actual or imagined it can be viewed as an authentic rite of passage into spiritual maturity, allowing a narrowly thinking, rigid and self-centered individual to become open, accepting, and spiritually

enlightened individual. The transformative experience of the NDE is legitimate and archetypal regardless of the authenticity of the experience.

Spiritual Maturity

Definition

Maturity is often recognized when an individual goes through a process of individuation. We hear about emotional and physical maturity, but rarely about spiritual maturity. According to Edinger, the first half of life is involved with ego development, “with progressive separation between ego and Self; whereas the second half of life requires a surrender or at least a relativization of the ego as it experiences and relates to the Self” (1992, p. 5). He states that “the basic problem for the adult is how to achieve the union with nature and the gods, with which the child starts, without bringing about the inflation of identification” (p. 11). Once an individual has achieved this, he or she has entered a state of maturity.

Spiritual Maturity through NDEs

I propose that these subjects in this study have entered a state of spiritual maturity as a result of the initiation of their near-death experiences. These individuals have changed their spiritual relationship with God and have referred to the near-death experience as the catalyst. Most have individuated from their original religions and have achieved a more personal spiritual path.

In the process, they became more selfless in their actions and sought more intimacy in their lives. As a consequence, they have achieved Edinger's challenge of achieving union with nature and the gods without bringing about the inflation of identification.

CHAPTER 5

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Review

We have explored the near-death experience as a rite of passage into spiritual maturity. When individuals have integrated a near-death experience, they are spiritually changed forever. They become more open to others, and consciously devote a part of their lives for service to others. They also make a concerted effort to improve their interpersonal relationships and ultimately lose their fear of death, seeing it as a transition rather than an end.

When the near-death experience is broken down, the three stages of a rite of passage are clearly seen. The stages of separation, liminality, and reintegration are all present. This lends strength to the idea that the near-death experience is an archetypal experience of a rite of passage.

We have also explored the effect of having had a life review during the NDE on individual's spiritual beliefs. Those individuals who had a life review during their experience seemed to release religious dogma more readily than those who did not. This has had a profound effect on their interpretation of God. Those who had a life review began to view God as a benevolent being who does not punish or condemn, and of whom we are all a part. Those who did not have the life review continued to view God as a separate being from themselves who, although He was viewed as benevolent, would willingly punish them for not following His desires.

Career changes that were made by those who have experienced the NDE were also reviewed. Changing career may be the individual's unconscious attempt to reintegrate into society with an acceptable change in status. It satisfies both society's need for an acceptable change in status and the individual's need to have the change in status recognized.

We have considered the NDE as a bottoming-out experience. As in all bottoming-out experiences, the individual must either change or die. We have observed how these individuals brought themselves to their bottoming-out experience and how the NDE was pivotal in turning it around.

Childhood NDEs with two of the interviewees were examined. Their experiences differed from adult experiences in that they did not appear to be a rite of passage into spiritual maturity. In fact, NDEs did not appear to be a rite of passage at all for young children. Rather, the childhood experiences resembled a holding and containing nature that helped to soothe and calm the child. The NDE gave the children an experience of unconditional love that they were able to integrate into their lives and benefit from. For the adolescent, it may be integrated as a rite of passage into adulthood.

In addition, we have explored the archetypal images that were present in the interviewees' NDEs from a Jungian perspective. The issues that are important to Jung's concept of the first dream were present in the NDEs of the interviewees. An individual's first dream often marks the beginning of progress to maturity and differentiation. The individuals who experienced a near-death experience became more differentiated in their spiritual beliefs.

We also considered the presence of the Trickster and Merlin in the experience and the maturity that comes with balancing the tension of the opposites.

Personal Impressions

Each of the participants felt a great deal of passion for this topic. It called to be treated with respect and reverence by the researcher. The spiritual quality and importance of the topic were always present in the working of the research. At times, it felt like an enormous task. The topic was large and at times unwieldy. The implications of the research are life changing; life does not end with death. My life and outlook on life changed dramatically as a result of doing the research.

The topic ultimately dealt with understanding the perceptions of reality. The greater idea lodged in the meaning of the work is that what we consider physical reality is an illusion and what comes after our death is what is real. That concept has been mind boggling for this researcher and has caused me many hours of internal turmoil, grappling with the concept. Through the course of writing this dissertation, my spiritual beliefs began to change. I began to view my world differently. I also began to view my work as a therapist differently.

As I write this dissertation, I myself am going through my own rite of passage. As I have worked the material, the material has worked me in reciprocation. Am I am forever changed having done this research.

My own near-death experience was not as involved as those of my interviewees. My own personal encounter left me with questions and doubts about my experience. I had never met anyone else who had had an NDE. I had read about them, but never personally met with anyone. Meeting with others who have had these experiences, I felt a strange and sudden kinship. The kinship experience seemed to be reciprocal.

During the interviews, I could sense the excitement for the experience that each interviewee held which fueled my own excitement about the topic in turn. Their zeal was infectious. All of those interviewed felt it important that this information be made available to others and were generous with their time and support to see that end met. What started out as a typical research project turned into a passionate personal investment with the goal of helping those who read this to understand and honor the divine selves that they are. The gentleness and kindness surrounding those individuals who were willing to be interviewed has been an inspiration in my own life.

It seemed clear that the interviewees are truly in touch with a deeper spiritual understanding for life. The divine seems present in everything they do. It is not possible to be in their presence and not be affected by their energy. I have felt truly honored to be given an opportunity to research and write on this material. I am honored that those people who gave me the opportunity to interview them would let me into the most intimate part of their being. I only hope that I have done justice to the topic.

There have been times when I have questioned the authenticity of my own near-death experience. At times, I feared that I had fabricated the entire experience. I did not acknowledge the changes that occurred in my life after the experience as anything connected to the NDE. I now know differently.

The archetype is a magnet that draws shards of expression to it. “What the ego wills is subject in the highest degree to the interference, in ways of which the ego is usually unaware, of the autonomy and numinosity of archetypal processes” (Jung, 1989, p. 353). This process unfolded in my practice as I was working on the research.

Throughout the research and writing of this dissertation, many remarkable experiences took place within my private practice. During the last year of researching the topic, I noticed a sudden change in the issues patients were bringing into the therapy room. The topic of death and loss became the focus of a significant portion of my practice.

The change was mainly attributable to new patients coming into my office presenting these topics. I also experienced several former patients simultaneously deciding to re-enter therapy with the presenting issue of their own dying or partners who were in the process of dying.

The process began in the spring of 1998 with the sudden and unexpected death of my beloved cat due to cancer. This experience was followed 3 weeks later by my assisting a friend whose own cat suffered from a similar disease, as a veterinarian put the cat to sleep. Three days later, I was involved in an emotional deposition for the prosecution over the

accidental death of a patient. It was a draining experience, and I was wracked with grief at his loss.

Three days after the deposition, the building in which my therapy offices were located burned to the ground. In the process, I lost everything of a physical nature that pertained to my education and work as a therapist. Three weeks later, a friend of mine lost his mother to cancer, and I offered emotional support throughout the process and after her passing. One week after her death and 5 weeks after the fire, my golden retriever, who had lived with me for 9 years, died of old age.

Death and loss were present and seemed to be everywhere in my personal life for me at that time. All the while, I continued doing the research on near-death experiences. My growing understanding of the research helped me through that difficult time. I had now begun to interview people who had had near-death experiences. Listening to their stories lifted me with hope for finding meaning in life. I began to realize that we were not alone in our tragedies and that grief along with all of our other experiences had meaning in this life and beyond.

Effect on the Researcher's Private Practice

Death of a Patient's Husband

By January of 1999, three quarters of my practice was made up of people dealing with different aspects of death and dying. One particularly moving experience took place after having completed the near-death

experience interview of Marco. During the interview, Marco mentioned that he saw a rainbow of lights before him that was made up of the souls of others. He reported it as a joyous and wondrous event to behold.

My head swimming from our intense interview, I returned to my office to see patients. The first patient I saw right after the interview was a woman who had lost her husband unexpectedly to a virulent cancer that January. She was distraught by his loss and overwhelmed at the prospect of raising her 3-year-old daughter on her own. Her grief was impenetrable. It had been 4 months since his death, and she was unable to work or be as present for her daughter as she needed to be. She wanted to know what happened to her husband and if she would ever see him again. In the deepest recesses of her beliefs, she feared that when he died, he disappeared into the void of nothingness. Her grief overwhelmed her.

She began the session by telling me a story of her daughter, now 4, who had caught her crying alone in her bedroom several days earlier. Her daughter walked into the bedroom and sat next to her as she fought back the tears. Her daughter asked her if she were sad because she missed daddy. My patient responded with a yes and hoped that her affirmative answer would not be traumatizing to the child.

The little girl put her arm around her mother and said, "Don't cry Mommy, when Daddy died, he left to become a rainbow." She responded to placate what she considered the childish imaginings of her daughter with, "Yes, of course he did sweetheart." I sat stone quiet in my chair as the hairs

on my neck and arms stood on end. I had just left an interview where that same event had been reported. I felt moved to relate my interview experience with her. We also spoke of the research that I was doing in my dissertation on near-death experiences. She broke down into deep and sustained sobbing.

The next week she entered therapy changed from the experience. She began to let go of her deceased husband's belongings and felt resolved enough to bury his ashes. She told me that something released for her during our last session. The future was something that she felt she could now face. The idea that there might be evidence of life continuing after death filled her with the inspiration that perhaps life did have some lasting meaning.

She began to greet the future with hope and expectation. In her mind, there was a reasonable possibility that his life continued. The reciprocal connection of love that she shared with her husband had not been broken by his death. She was now free to let go of the grief and embrace life, for life's promise of connection had not been betrayed through her husband's death. The realistic possibility that life continues after death was all she needed to consider trusting again in the processes of life.

Death of a Patient's Lover

Later that month I had another patient whose lover was in the final stages of death due to complications from AIDS. Again, sharing the work of my research seemed to help this patient in handling the inevitable loss of his

lover. By coming to view the approaching death of his lover as a transition, rather than annihilation, he was able to let go of the fight for his life at an appropriate time and spend the final days together in peace.

Interestingly, half an hour before his lover's death, my patient awoke in the night to check on him and sat down on his bed to spend some time. His partner had been in a coma for the last 24 hours and had not moved. A few moments after he sat down, his dying lover opened his eyes with a distant stare, lifted his arms out in front of himself, and began to smile the brightest smile he had ever seen on him. He then brought his arms down to his sides, closed his eyes, and died.

After the patient related the story to me, he stated that he was grateful for our discussions about near-death experiences. He saw his lover's experience as an authentic transition experience and not the musings of a delusional mind. He felt that in his lover's final moments, someone met him from the other side who came to help him across. He was comforted by the possibility that his lover's life continued after the death of his body.

Much of what I have learned from the research has been useful in my private practice. Besides the apparent comfort some people gain from having an awareness of near-death experiences when those close to them die, it also has apparent benefits for those facing their own mortality. The following took place during the same time period.

Death of a Patient

During the time I was working with the above individuals, I received a telephone call from a former patient. She urgently wanted me to visit her in the hospital, where she was being treated for cancer. Both she and her boyfriend were in denial about the seriousness of her health condition. They would both talk about the future in a manner that did not seem appropriate given her condition. It was as if their speaking of the future could magically prevent her death. I was not going to take away their hope. I was, however, curious about her need to use this defense.

By our third session, she had confided in me that she was afraid of dying. She had very little experience with it in her life and did not know what to expect. She did not want to vanish into a black void of nonexistence. To her, life would seem such a waste if that were its ultimate goal. Then she suddenly changed the topic in the middle of our discussion. She asked about the nature of my dissertation; she was aware I was a doctoral candidate.

I was astonished. When I told her, she wanted to know the details. At the end of the session, she stretched out her hands from the hospital bed in a motion for me to hold them. When I did, she said, "Thank you. . . thank you" in a voice straining from her waning strength that seemed mixed with resolve and joy. That was the last time I saw her. She died 3 days later from a respiratory complication.

Our discussion of near-death experiences seemed to have given her a more realistic hope for the future than did her original defenses against

death. The fact that scholarly energies were being devoted to its research bolstered for her the credibility of such possibilities. In that moment, she appeared to let go of her fear. I received the news of her death with a mixture of sadness and joy. My reaction surprised me. For it was the first time that I had ever received news of that nature in which joy was part of the mixture of my emotions.

The Researcher's Reaction

When I contemplated my reaction, I realized that a fundamental part of myself had shifted as a result of my working with the topic. I felt joy for the release that she must have experienced at the moment of her death and for the love that would engulf her as the experience progressed. It was not a pious or fashionably appropriate joy, but rather an authentic joy that caught me by surprise.

The addition of joy into the mix of emotion upon hearing of someone's death was in no way intended to be dismissive of the feelings of those left behind. Nor was it to be used as a form of denial for personal grief; there was plenty of that present. The joy came from a place where I marveled at the mysteries of life having gained a renewed trust in its processes.

While I was working with the above patients, another former patient came back into my practice that had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Two other patients were newly diagnosed with HIV. Another began to face mortality issues around a terminal health condition. Two other

patients lost a parent each, another patient lost her best friend to an illness, and another lost his entire family in a plane crash. All of these cases involving death took place between January and August 1999.

With each one of these cases, I was able to work some form of the research into the therapy. In each case, it had a beneficial effect in the course of our work. The concept of the near-death experience brings mystery back into life. Besides the ease it may bring to an individual's fears, it also creates a wonder for life. This is the gift that is brought back by those who have experienced a near-death experience.

I can think of no greater gift than the gift of wonder. For in our wonder, we meet our innocence. In our innocence, we hold no malice. By holding no malice, we are open to the processes of life, and by opening to life, we hold eternity in our hands.

Implications for Therapy

The Benefits

I have found that having an awareness of and respect for near-death experiences is beneficial in a variety of therapeutic situations. The benefits of the topic are not confined to working only with those who have had the experience. The lessons learned from this research easily lend themselves to situations involving loss and grief due to the passing of loved ones as well as the facing of our own mortality.

For instance, the individuals who were interviewed identified their desire to be of service to others as an important positive change that took place as a result of their NDE. Being of service to others can pull one out of self-involvement, which can be of benefit for someone who is caught in a never-ending cycle of depression due to a loss or a personal bottoming-out experience. It can allow the individual to gain a sense of self-empowerment and feel a sense of purpose in life.

The comfort that patients gain from the serious consideration that life might continue after the death of the body is helpful to their emotional well being. They no longer need to feel themselves as a helpless victims of their own mortality. When one is not identifying oneself as the victim, then one can be more accountable for one's actions.

In several of the cases, individuals mentioned that during their experience they could sense their smallness in the vastness of life and at the same time were aware of the importance of their contributions to the whole. This realization helped to raise their sense of self-esteem and gave them a sense of belonging. This alone can be a powerful contribution to lifting an individual out of depression. It was a very empowering experience and should be explored with a patient who has had a near-death experience.

Further Considerations

There are also those who have had near-death experiences that have a difficult time integrating them into their lives. They are frightened of being

ridiculed or considered deranged, so they keep their experiences to themselves. The holding onto the secret is itself anxiety causing. What they need is someone who is willing to listen and who has some knowledge of NDEs. Their experience needs to be heard in a nonjudgmental context.

There is a strong possibility that people who have just experienced an NDE might already be in the throes of a bottoming-out experience in their personal life. If this is the case, they may already be feeling disconnected and misunderstood by others. It is imperative that they not be judged for their near-death experience. The experience should be normalized for them through acceptance and understanding. They should also be referred to the International Association for Near-death Studies where they can have contact with others who share their experience.

People who have reported having had a near-death experience should be encouraged to give meaning to their experience. Depending on the appropriateness for a particular patient, the experience could be reframed as a rite of passage in spiritual growth. This would help give some meaning to the experience and allow the individual to integrate those positive aspects of the experience into their personal lives. Doing so might help a patient more easily come to terms with the personal changes that take place after such an event.

Whether or not the experience is believed to be authentic, it can have authentic value. All of those interviewed accepted greater personal accountability for their actions after their experience. They reported feeling

more self-directed and self-confident. They became dedicated to improving their interpersonal relationships. They reported feeling a greater sensitivity toward and respect for all life. They developed an internal desire to be of service to others without an ulterior motive for personal gain. Their concept of and belief in God expanded beyond the narrow views of religious dogma. They lost their fear of death; however, suicide was no longer an option. Consequently, they experienced a generalized improvement in their life condition.

The Responsibility of the Medical Community

It stands to reason that with proper counseling from the medical and mental health fields, individuals who have experienced NDEs can make these adjustments more effectively and quickly. It is important for the medical community to recognize the important role a near-death experience can have on an individual's life. Rather than dismissing or ridiculing a patient for having reported such an event by calling it a hallucination or fabrication, the physician should be more familiar with the experience and have on hand a list of therapists and societies that handle near-death experiences.

The reason I singled out physicians is simple; they set the tone of the treatment team. In every case I interviewed, professionals from the health-care industry, physicians in particular, were involved at some point in the events surrounding the NDE. In nearly every case, people were afraid to

mention the experience to their doctor. They were afraid of not being believed or taken seriously.

The position of the physician is not to be a judge but rather an assistant in the improvement of the health of the individual. They have taken an oath to protect their patients' health. This health includes mental health. Given the resulting changes that individuals attribute to NDEs and the frequent presence of physicians around the precipitating event, I feel that it is imperative that physicians give individuals who report NDEs the respect of validating these experiences and referring them to someone who can assist them in that area.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

Study: *Near-death experiences: Their Effects on the Beliefs and Attitudes of Those who Experience Them.*

1. I understand that this study is of a research nature. It may offer no direct benefit to me.
2. My participation in this study is voluntary. I may refuse to enter it, refuse to answer any question, or withdraw at any time without creating any harmful consequences to myself. I also understand that the investigator may drop me from the study at any time.
3. I understand that the purpose of doing this study is to collect information regarding near-death experiences in order to fulfill the requirements of a doctoral dissertation for Pacifica Graduate Institute. Material gathered during the research process will be used in this dissertation and in other publications.
4. As a participant in this study, I will be asked to take part in the following procedures:
 - a. Complete a brief participant information form.
 - b. Agree to have researcher, James E. Walton, ask me a series of questions about my near-death experience. This process will involve a 1 1/2 to 2 hour audio-taped interview. I further understand that any information collected about me in this study will remain confidential.
 - c. Participate in a final review of information collected where the researcher will share with me what he has written from my interview. I understand that I will have an opportunity to give input as to the accuracy of what he has depicted concerning my experience.
5. Information about this study, time and the place of my interview within the study were discussed with me by James E. Walton. If I have further questions concerning the study or procedures, I can call him at 818-753-4865.
6. I understand that if, at any time during the study, I feel distressed about my situation or my participation, I may telephone James E. Walton at the phone number above. He will provide me with appropriate information or referrals for therapy, the cost of which would be my responsibility.
7. I am not receiving any compensation for participating in this study other than the personal satisfaction for participating in the study.

Date _____ Signature _____

Appendix BQuestions for the Volunteers.

1. Where and when did you experience the NDE?
2. How did you come to experience the NDE?
3. What did you experience during the NDE?
4. Did you feel separation from your body?
5. Did you experience a peace?
6. Did you have feeling in your body?
7. Did you feel clarity of thought?
8. Did you see a tunnel?
9. Did you see a light?
10. Did you meet with anyone?
11. Did you experience a review of your life?
12. Was there a desired personal change that you were not able to effect before the NDE that you were able to accomplish after the NDE?
13. How easy was it?
14. Has your life changed as a result of the NDE?
15. Have your relationships with your family and friends changed?
16. How did your doctors respond to your experience?
17. How have others responded to you in regard to the NDE?
18. How would you like people to respond to your experience?
19. Why do you think you experienced an NDE?
20. Have your beliefs about death changed as a result of your experience?

21. Do you have any fear of death now?
22. Are you left with any fears as a result of the NDE?
23. Has your experience affected your spiritual beliefs?
24. What were your spiritual beliefs at the time of the NDE?
25. How have you integrated this experience into your life?
26. Have you noticed any changes in your behavior since the NDE?
27. Has your experience affected your attitude toward life?
28. Are you left with any questions about your experience?