

This paper was originally prepared for the German Conference on Ecstatic States of Consciousness I will be attending in May of 2008. They requested that I shorten it and focus on the aftereffects part, which I will do. Although this longer version will not be published by them, I include it here for your information. PMH

NEAR-DEATH STATES: A TRANSFORMATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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P. M. H. Atwater, L.H.D. is one of the original researchers in the field of near-death studies, having begun her work in 1978. From a research base of nearly 4,000 adult and child experiencers, she has written nine books about her findings. Some of her work has been verified in clinical studies, including the prospective study done in Holland by Pim van Lommel, M.D. and Associates, and published in Lancet, 12-15-01. In 2005, she was awarded the Outstanding Service Award from the International Association For Near-Death Studies, and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Association of Transpersonal Hypnotherapists (United States).

ABSTRACT: Any consideration of near-death experiences must also address aftereffects and the challenge of integration. If the near-death phenomenon is seen in context of the “before” and “after” lives of experiencers, surprising considerations arise that are often at variance with what is popularly reported. This article focuses on an analysis of these changes as related to the transformation of consciousness that typically occurs.

The near-death experience is defined as an intense awareness, sense, or experience of “otherworldliness,” whether pleasant or unpleasant, that happens to people who are at the edge of death. It is of such magnitude that most experiencers are deeply affected, many to the point of making significant changes in their lives afterward because of what they went through.

The closer an individual is to physical death, the more apt he or she is to have one, although “near-death-like” experiences can occur without the threat of imminent death. We know now because of extensive research done in numerous countries (Atwater, 2007) that drugs, oxygen

deprivation, temporal lobe seizures, psychological disorders, and other possible mediators are not causal, neither do they describe or account for the full range of near-death states and the aftereffects which follow.

A signature feature of the phenomenon is that no matter how long an experiencer is without vital signs – no pulse, no breath, no indicators of brain wave activity – not only will little or no brain damage be found afterwards, but, the average individual will begin to display an unexplainable enhancement of intellect. How long are the majority of these people without vital signs? I and most other researchers agree – somewhere between five to 20 minutes. There are cases of experiencers without vital signs for an hour or more who revived in the morgue.

Anyone at any age can have a near-death experience. That includes tiny ones still in the womb, babies being born, infants, and toddlers. Once they are verbal, the smallest experiencers do their best to convey what happened to them either through the telling of stories, drawing scenes, or acting out what they saw. How their attempts to share their story are received, determines, to a large extent, whether or not their episode has a positive influence in their life or is tucked away, avoided, or repressed. The pattern of aftereffects cannot be denied; the experience can.

Most of the women in my research base had their experience during a birth crisis, miscarriage, rape, or hysterectomy. Most of the men had theirs in connection with heart/blood problems, acts of violence, or in an accident. With children, the majority came from either birth trauma or accidents (usually drownings or suffocation); many were also linked to surgery and situations of parental or sibling abuse.

Near-death episodes are powerfully real, whether brief or lengthy, and defy the label of “hallucinations.” Bruce Greyson, M.D., in his study entitled “Consistency of Near-Death Experience Accounts Over Two Decades: Are Reports Embellished Over Time?” (Greyson, 2007), found no significant difference with 72 experiencers who filled out an extensive survey report that they had previously done 20 years ago. His conclusion after comparing the two: “Memories of near-death experiences appear to be more stable than memories of other traumatic events.” My observation is similar: near-death states tend to be clear, lucid, and coherent life-long.

Contrary to popular opinions on the subject, I discovered that there are four types of near-death states, not just one. The following chart is based on 3,000 adult and 277 child experiencers. As you examine the chart, note that a subtle psychological “profile” seems to be present with each, as if predictive of who might have what type.

THE FOUR TYPES OF NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

- Initial Experience (sometimes referred to as the “non-experience”) Involves elements such as a loving nothingness, the living dark, a friendly voice, or a brief out-of-body experience; perhaps a visitation of some kind. Usually experienced by those who seem to need the least amount of evidence for proof of survival, or who need the least amount of shakeup in their lives at that point in time. Often, this becomes a “seed” experience or an introduction to other ways of perceiving and recognizing reality.

Incident rate: 76% with child experiencers
20% with adult experiencers

- Unpleasant or Hellish Experience (inner cleansing and self-confrontation) Encounter with a threatening void or stark limbo or hellish purgatory, or scenes of a startling and unexpected indifference, even “hauntings” from one’s own past. Usually experienced by those who seem to have deeply suppressed or repressed guilts, fears, and angers, or those who expect some kind of punishment or discomfort after death.

Incident rate: 3% with child experiencers
15% with adult experiencers

- Pleasant or Heavenly Experience (reassurance and self-validation) Heaven-like scenarios of loving family reunions with those who have died previously (can include pets who have passed on), reassuring religious figures or light beings, validation that life counts, affirmative and inspiring dialogue. Usually experienced by those who most need to know how loved they are and how important life is – how every effort has a purpose in the overall scheme of things.

Incident rate: 19% with child experiencers

47% with adult experiencers

- Transcendent Experiences (expansive revelations, alternate realities)
Exposure to otherworldly dimensions and scenes beyond the individual's frame of reference; sometimes includes revelations of greater truths. Seldom personal in content. Usually experienced by those who are ready for a mind stretching challenge or individuals who are more apt to utilize (to whatever degree) the truths that are revealed to them.

Incident rate: 2% with child experiencers
18% with adult experiencers

Life reviews are typical components of Pleasant and Unpleasant types, but seldom show up in Transcendent states – not at all with Initial ones. Whether the episode was brief and consisted of only one to three elements (as is common with Initial Experiences), or lengthy and filled with a complex range of elements, the deciding factor as to its impact is intensity. Even simple experiences with hardly anything to them, if intense enough, can engender the full range of physiological and psychological aftereffects, matching the impact of those more involved.

I have discovered that the true “core” experience has little to do with the number or type of components in the scenario, but, rather, with the intensity of what was experienced. For instance, children who have their episode in the birth canal, or as infants, and once verbal describe a single spirit visitation or perhaps cuddling snuggly into the loving nothingness, can exhibit the same aftereffects as adults who are effusive about angels, heavenly realms, revelations from Jesus, and long talks with their dead grandmother. This makes no sense if compared to the original criteria we, as researchers, were once urged to use; yet it makes perfect sense if studied in the light of current challenges from broad-based findings such as my own.

Dr. Greyson is quoted as saying in a press release that the near-death phenomenon is stress-related, a natural response to intense trauma (Greyson, 2007). But, if you study the fuller implications of what he said, that the concentration of focus and dissociation created by these states correlate to what can result in traumatic situations, you recognize that his findings uphold what has been known historically about the making of a

good shaman, wise one, or priest, regardless of culture. And that is, what enabled these individuals to be singled out from their fellows with abilities and awarenesses beyond “the norm” – was an experience of slipping beyond the pale of death into the realms of spirit through some type of traumatic incident or intensely-felt ritual.

If near-death states are a natural response to intense trauma, and if “gifts” conferred by spirit are a natural response to intensely-felt accidents or rituals, then what is really going on here? And, why isn’t everyone so involved equally affected?

I believe the stress Dr. Greyson referred to, is what mystical traditions call “high stress.” He even indicated as such in his statement. High stress describes a state of emotional intensity that is so powerful it overloads or bypasses an individual’s ability to think or cope; yet, instead of disordering or destroying sanity, it brings him or her to a higher, more positive expression of enhanced behavior that appears as “stress-free.” It reorders the mind instead of disorders.

High stress exists as a commonality in what pushes human consciousness to transform how it functions. But what causes the peculiarities of high stress? Since the aftereffects of near-death states and consciousness transformations (no matter how caused) are the same or similar, and since near-death states can happen to anyone at any age, I would like to use them as a model to explore the larger genre of transformations of consciousness.

A link can be made between near-death scenarios, the event’s timing, and the personal needs of experiencers. A synopsis follows of what I have observed about this link during the three decades I have been conducting research:

Most episodes happen during major junctures or times of unusual stress in the person’s life, when spiritual guidance or direction would be most helpful.

With young children, relatives and caregivers can be affected as well – to the degree that it is almost as if the child had the experience for them. Yet, the extent to which the episode transformed the youngster becomes more apparent as he or she matures, and can become

a quiet but powerful directive in the life path chosen by the child once grown.

Causes and conditions of death can reflect, at least symbolically, the experiencer's past or current psychological growth; maturity, or lack of it.

The initial spirit greeters at death's threshold always match whatever is necessary to alert or calm the experiencer, be that a child or an adult.

As the episode deepens, the scenario's message parallels almost exactly what the subconscious needs are of the individual at that moment in time.

The life review, and any other component that might cover lectures, insights, or advice, reflects to whatever extent what was omitted, ignored, or not yet learned in life by the experiencer involved.

Afterward, the experiencer's behavior tends to shift toward a desire to express that which has been undeveloped or partially developed – physically in the sense of brain function/nerve sensitivity, psychologically in the sense of personal growth/maturity, spiritually in the sense of a personal relationship with Deity or God – as if whatever traits are missing in the individual's overall maturing process are now being “filled in.”

I never cease to be amazed at how forthcoming near-death experiencers are when asked to evaluate what happened to them. Almost to a person they say, “I got what I needed.” This straight answer suggests that another agenda may be in force besides that of the personality self: perhaps that of a greater version of the self – the soul. Whatever the truth of this, and it may never be proved one way or the other, the need factor is plainly obvious as to timing, storyline, and outcome of near-death states – not in the sense of predetermination or wish fulfillment - but, rather, in terms of a subconscious “agenda” of a higher, more spiritual order. What impresses me the most is how the scenario people experience always catches their attention in the precise way and manner that is the most effective for them. Near-death scenarios hardly ever touch on what most of

us might expect considering the gravity of that person's life choices and deeds.

As an example: murderers hardly ever wind up in dungeons where hellish demons can prick them to pieces with hot pokers. Such criminals usually experience those scenes that infuse them with life's true meaning and purpose. . . after they have been subjected to "living through" on every level the pain and hardship they caused others. They are subjected to "trading places" rather than being punished. Those I met who experienced scenarios like this were so utterly shaken by what they went through that they never returned to a life of crime. One Mafia hitman, for instance, after such an episode, devoted the rest of his life to serving the impoverished by dishing up meals in a church soup kitchen. His explanation? "I want to make up for what I have done."

The subtle psychological "profile" I discovered to be present with each type of near-death experience, seems somehow predictive in the sense of who has what. This profile is consistent with the vast majority of people I had sessions with – regardless of their race, educational level, status, religious beliefs, or location. Although much more research needs to be done to establish how universal this pattern is, so far it has withstood the scrutiny of researchers and experiencers alike.

Looking again at the four types, you could shorten the general description of each to read like this:

Initial Experience. Awakening to a greater reality.

Unpleasant Experience. Untangling false perceptions.

Pleasant Experience. Recognizing true values and priorities.

Transcendent Experience. Embracing universal oneness.

When you present the subtle psychological profile in this manner, it becomes illustrative of developmental stages in the growth of human consciousness, both personally and en masse, as if consciousness itself can expand to embrace the responsibility we all share as members of the same universal family.

Does this indicate that we always meet our own beliefs after we die? Do we really determine our heavens and hells by our attitudes?

On one hand the answer to these questions appears to be yes. And there is ample evidence to back up this assumption. Yet, on the other hand, I must say “not necessarily,” and here’s why: the notion that we alone decide our heavens and hells based on our own personal beliefs begins to fall apart when we examine shared and group near-death experiences. These incidents offer a major challenge to any conclusion we might make about storylines, or how to regard the mystical traditions of any given culture, country, or religion.

Consider the following:

Shared near-death states. There are cases in which several experiencers seem to share in each other’s episode; that is, they have the same or similar elements, scenario type, and basic storyline. Usually these are encountered when two or three people are involved in the same accident at the same time, or are in the same general section of a hospital at the same time. Sometimes these states are experienced singly (one individual is not aware of the other during the episode, but learns later that both apparently had the same scenario). Sometimes the people involved are aware of each other, and are able to confirm the extent of that awareness after they have the opportunity to compare their separate stories.

Group near-death states. These are rare, but they do occur. With this kind, a whole group of people simultaneously seem to experience the same or similar episode. What makes these so spectacular and challenging is that all or most of the experiencers see each other actually leave their bodies as their scenario begins, then they dialogue with each other and share messages and observations while still involved in the near-death state. Their separate reports afterward either match or nearly so. Accounts like these usually emerge from harrowing events that involve a lot of people.

Shared and group near-death experiences imply that no matter how certain we are that near-death states mean this or that, and are the result of whatever, no single idea, theory, or definitive answer can explain them. Even clues from the powerful patterning of the incident itself, a pattern-

ing researchers such as myself have identified, fail to explain all aspects of the phenomenon.

Examine the aftereffects. The pattern of their occurrence is physiological as well as psychological. Not only do near-death states tend to enliven and enrich people's lives, and nudge them closer to a more respectful and spiritual nature, there are obvious physical changes that happen as well. Here are the aftereffects as I have observed them, along with the percentages I found with 3,000 adult and 277 child experiencers of near-death states:

PHYSIOLOGICAL AFTEREFFECTS OF NEAR-DEATH STATES

Most Common (between 80 to 90%) – more sensitive to light, especially sunlight, and to sound (tastes in music often change); look younger/act younger/more playful with adults – look older/act and seem more mature with children; substantial change in energy levels (can have energy surges); changes in thought processing (switch from sequential selective thinking to clustered/abstracting with an acceptance of ambiguity); insatiable curiosity; lower blood pressure; bright skin and eyes; reversal of brain hemisphere dominance (commonplace); heal quicker.

Quite Common (50 to 79%) – reversal of body clock, electrical sensitivity, heightened intelligence, metabolic changes (doesn't take as long to process food, bowel movements can be more frequent); assimilate substances into bloodstream quicker (many turn to alternative and complementary healing modalities); heightened response to taste/touch/textured/smell/pressure; more creative and inventive; synesthesia (multiple sensing); increased allergies; preference for more vegetables, less meat with adults – more meat, less vegetables with children; latent talents can surface; indications of brain structure/functionary changes, as well as differences in nervous and digestive systems, skin sensitivity.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AFTEREFFECTS OF NEAR-DEATH STATES

Most Common (between 80 to 99%) – loss of the fear of death; become more spiritual and less religious; more generous and charitable; handle stress easier; philosophical; more open and accepting of

the new and different; disregard for time and schedules; regard things as new even when they are not, boredom levels decrease; form expansive concepts of love while at the same time challenged to initiate and maintain satisfying relationships; become psychic/intuitive, know things (closer connection to Deity/God, prayerful); deal with bouts of depression, less competitive.

Quite Common (50 to 79%) – displays of psychic phenomena, vivid dreams and visions; “inner child” issues exaggerate; convinced of life purpose/mission; rejection of previous limitations and norms; episodes of knowing the future common including “future memory;” more detached and objective (dissociation); “merge” easily (absorption); hunger for knowledge, yet difficulty communicating and with word meanings; can go through deep depression and feelings of alienation from others; synchronicity typical; more or less sexual; less desire for possessions and money; service oriented; healing ability; attract animals (good with plants); aware of invisible energy fields/auras; preference for open doors and open windows/shades; drawn to crystals; laugh more; adults lighter afterwards – children wiser, more serious (bonding to parents can lessen).

When you study the full pattern of psychological and physiological aftereffects, I think you will recognize what I have, and that is: near-death states appear to cause a structural and functionary change in the brain (perhaps also chemical). It is as if experiencers are somehow rewired and reconfigured – some, of course, more than others. And this is especially evident with children.

The age criteria for having a near-death experience in my work with children was from birth to 15 years. When old enough to take the standard IQ test, 48% registered scores between 150 to 160 - without genetic markers to account for it. Some educators claim that the score for genius begins at 134 to 136. Others state that it is 140. These kids were well above that, and they excelled in non-verbal intelligence, which is creative problem solving, along with spatial reasoning. . . with no difference between genders as to the ability. Most of those with enhancements in math (93%), also exhibited the same enhancement in music. This implies that the regions in the brain for math and music seem to be accelerated during near-death states as if they were the same unit (Atwater, 1999 and 2003).

And there are learning reversals afterward: a typical experiencer comes back abstracting. The younger they are the more noticeable this is. A good example with kids is that of a first grade boy who, about half-way through the school year drowned, then was resuscitated. When he was able to return to class, his agemates were still reading simple sentences like "See Spot run." Not him. All of a sudden he was reading Greek mythology and wanted to know why the book Robinson Crusoe (Defoe, 1941) was ever written. He was unable to readjust to the first grade after that, and had to be put in a special class for gifted learners.

My study of child experiencers shows large clusters, age-wise, specifically between birth and fifteen months and between three to five years. If you combine these two clusters into a subgroup, the jump in IQ scores rises to 81 percent at the genius level, indicating to me that the younger the child the more susceptible he or she is to the sudden charge of intensity from the near-death phenomenon. The very youngest, however, if engulfed in a dark light rather than a bright one during their episode, had scores of 182 and higher on standard IQ tests. (Normally, brain circuitry formation skyrockets during infancy; three to five-year-olds typically undergo temporal lobe development as they experience the birth of imagination and creative thought. Near-death states seem to accelerate whatever is normal.)

A correlation can be made here with the work of Linda Silverman, Ph.D., one of the leading authorities in the United States on giftedness. In her research, 80% of the most profoundly gifted children, those youngsters whose IQ scores began at 180, were born premature and underwent birth trauma. Every one of them went on to exhibit the typical aftereffects of the near-death experience, with the same shift in consciousness toward social justice, human rights, and spirituality - traits typical of enhancements in pre-frontal lobe development (at any age).

Take my findings and examine history. Look for people of significant import who nearly died in infancy or childhood and then went on to display the pattern of near-death aftereffects. In one week of library work I located the following people who fit the criteria: Abraham Lincoln, Mozart, Queen Elizabeth I, Winston Churchill, Einstein, and Edward de Vere the 17th Earl of Oxford – whom I now believe is the real Shakespeare. (Edward de Vere's case is so dramatic that I devoted a section to it in the appendices to my book Future Memory).

Because of what I have seen in my research, I no longer consider near-death states to be any sort of anomaly. Rather, I consider them to be part of the larger genre of transformations of consciousness, no matter how caused. I include in this genre those episodes of a more turbulent nature such as religious conversions, near-death episodes, kundalini breakthroughs, shamanic rituals, sudden spiritual transformations, even certain types of head trauma or having been hit by lightning. I also include those more tranquil in how they are experienced: from the slow, steady application of spiritual disciplines, mindfulness techniques, meditation, vision quests, or because in a prayerful state of mind an individual simply desires to become a better person.

Because the aftereffects of all of these transformative states are the same or similar, I now refer to the process itself of transforming consciousness as a brain shift/spirit shift.

This is a logical statement to make in light of the cutting-edge research currently being conducted via brain scans to determine the effect something exotic or unique has on brain structure. To quote Marcus Raichle, a researcher at Washington University during news coverage of his work: “You can essentially rearrange the brain in fifteen minutes.” If something unusual or exotic can do that, what of the highly charged climate of the near-death phenomenon?

Cases are on the increase. Because of modern technology, people who would have otherwise died are now being resuscitated or revive. It is estimated that between four to five percent of world’s population will experience a near-death state; for those in medical distress/crisis the figure is 12 to 20 percent. Why some people have them and others do not is unknown.

Integration is another matter. The experience and its aftereffects can be a challenge to live with. The urge to serve, the depth of compassion and empathy experiencers come to display, the desire to “walk with God,” the extent to which unconditional love begins to influence everyday life routines – all of this does not shield near-death experiencers (and those like them) from depression, confusion, or disorientation. Some report no problems whatsoever in adjusting to “life as always,” but the majority I

have had sessions with find that they must face and deal with some very difficult issues.

Consider the case of a woman in Alabama (U.S.), who was married to a fundamentalist preacher. The two had been married for many years and had three children and a busy lifestyle. Since her near-death experience, it had become increasingly difficult for her to attend her husband's church services. As she put it:

He's wrong. I know now deep in my heart he's wrong. What he's preaching, that's not the way it is. I feel like he's telling everyone a lie and I don't know what to do about it. I love my husband and I love our children. I don't want to upset him or anyone else. I don't want a divorce or anything like that. But I can't listen any more. I try to pretend I'm too busy to come (Atwater, 1988).

A man in southern California (U.S.) said, "I love my wife and children more than I ever thought I could. I love everyone. My experience taught me real love, unconditional love!" Yet, his wife and children did not feel the kind of love from him that he described. They recognized how wonderfully he had changed, but he seemed somehow unreachable to them, as if he were floating around in a world of his own making, out-of-touch with what was really going on and with their personal needs. A gap developed between what he felt and what they felt. The last letter I received from this loving husband and father was one of desperation. He was having a tough time holding down a job and earning a living, not to mention dealing with the challenges from his family. He could not understand why people had trouble getting along with him, since he was so filled with joy and love for all of them. He was generous and openly affectionate, yet people tended to turn away or back off when he was around. As a last resort, he decided to leave town and drift for awhile until he could figure out what was wrong. I have not heard from him since (Atwater, 1988).

In order for integration to take place, an experiencer's decision on whether or not to accept or reject what happened becomes primary. Acceptance means risk. It means being different from others and possibly alienating one's own family. But it also means the satisfaction of remaining true to one's experience, whatever that implies.

Rejection means denial. It means forgetting, denying, or casting aside what was once believed to be true. The apparent risk is less than with acceptance, and there is little chance of anyone feeling threatened. It means life will go on as usual, but with the possibility of later restlessness and discontent, and perhaps being haunted by the experience.

Acceptance is no panacea and rejection offers no escape. Not all who accept their experience become positive members of society again, and not all who deny their experience have actually opted for the easier path. Acceptance can foster the start of radical, aberrant behavior that is excessively threatening to others and also unproductive. Denial can bring about the beginnings of self-distrust and a weakening of self-confidence and creative potential. In my opinion, neither way is easier or harder.

I have noticed that adult experiencers often become more child-like in that they need time to learn or re-learn the basics of a new way of living. Some learn faster than others. Ignorance and indifference delay this process of adjustment. The sooner experiencers realize how typical their challenges are, in light of what they have been through, the more quickly they stabilize the aftereffects and reintegrate back into society in a positive way.

The families of experiencers may also need assistance. In many cases, the family deals with more confusion than does the experiencer, especially if there are young children at home. These “significant others” did not have the experience and they do not understand what is going on – why their loved one suddenly seems like a stranger. Yet, they, too, can learn almost as much through dealing with the experiencer as that person can learn from his or her experience. The near-death episode and its aftermath can be a shared event with all of those touched by it, so that each person can have an opportunity to benefit from the changes it brings.

My research shows that, on the average, it took adults a minimum of seven years to successfully adjust to their near-death experience. This timing alters with child experiencers. Children usually compensate for, rather than integrate, unusual or impactful experiences until they are much older. They can and sometimes do block or set aside the integration process, until something triggers full memory – maybe 20 or 30 years

later. Once the integration process begins, however, I have observed that most “grow” through these particular phases.

INTEGRATION PHASES NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCERS “GROW” THROUGH

Phase One First 3 years – Impersonal, detached from ego identity/ personality traits. Caught up in a desire to express unconditional love and oneness with all life. Fearless, knowing, vivid psychic displays, substantially more or less energy, more or less sexual, spontaneous surges of energy, a hunger to learn more and do more. Child-like mannerisms with adults/adult-like behaviors with children, a heightened sense of curiosity and wonder, IQ enhancements, much confusion, communication challenges.

Phase Two* Next 4 years – Rediscovery of and concerned with relationships, family, and community. Service and healing oriented. Interest in projects development and work environment expands. Tend to realign or alter life roles; seek to reconnect with one’s fellows, especially in a moral or spiritual way. Unusually more or less active/contemplative. Can resume former lifestyle, but more desirous of carrying out “mission.”

Phase Three After the 7th year – More practical and discerning, often back-to-work but with a broader worldview and a confident attitude. Aware of self-worth and of “real” identity (soul). Tend toward self-governance and self-responsibility. Spiritual development an ongoing priority, along with sharing one’s story and its meaning. Dedicated. Strong sense of spiritual values.

Phase Four** Around 15th year (with some 12th or 20th year) – Immense fluctuations in mood and hormonal levels. Often discouraged or depressed while go through a period of “grieving” – reassessing gains and losses from the experience, while fearful that effects are fading. Many problems with relationships, money, and debts. A crisis of “self.” If can negotiate “the darkness light can bring,” a depth of spiritual maturity and confidence emerges that is unique to the long-term effects of a transformation of consciousness.

NOTE: * Child experiencers in my study who turned to alcohol for solace (1/3), began drinking during this phase. ** Child experiencers who attempted suicide afterwards to get back to the “Other Side” (21%), did so in this phase.

The seventh year is like a marker, a “first birthday,” that celebrates the experiencer’s ability to “bring to earth the gifts of heaven” in practical and meaningful ways. Somewhere between the twelfth to the fifteenth year, sometimes up to and around the twentieth, there is another marker, a “second birthday,” and it catches most experiencers unaware. Phase Four is like a second drop, a second shift. This second drop is similar to a second death in that it heralds a time of life reversals and the need to ask some tough questions: “Were the sacrifices I made since my episode worth it? Am I capable of carrying out my mission? Is it possible to live a spiritual life in the earthplane? Have I been honest with myself? Are the aftereffects fading?” If the experiencer can successfully negotiate the challenges of this second drop, a second shift is possible – a major advancement toward “the peace that passeth all understanding.”

All of the child experiencers in my study who ever had a serious problem with alcohol, started drinking during Phase Two – a period when relationships of varied types become primary and the pressures of job versus mission tend to overwhelm the individual. Asked why they drank, most said it was to ease the pain they felt of not “fitting in” or to escape the ridicule of family and friends. I found no such consistency with adult cases.

Every one of the child experiencers in my study who attempted suicide after their near-death event to get back to the “Other Side,” did so during Phase Four. Not so with the four percent of adult experiencers who tried the same thing. Adult incidents of this type spread out during the years of Phases One and Two.

The majority of child experiencers who underwent another near-death episode in adulthood, had that second one in Phase Four. For instance, a young boy drowned at the age of five, miraculously revived 15 minutes later, and immediately began to see “through” people and act in “odd” ways. As he matured, what interested his agemates bored him. Behavior problems resulted. At 18, he joined the Army, hoping he would

die. He did, in an accident. He had another near-death scenario during resuscitation that “explained” the earlier one and gave him the courage he needed to turn his life around (Atwater, 1999).

The second drop that occurs is not always as perilous as it was for the young man just mentioned; but, unlike the first shift, it is a time of reckoning and reassessment when experiencers make major decisions that require new commitments. The first shift can be linked to the original near-death state. The second shift seems more dependent on choice – on the experiencer’s willingness to surrender to a “Greater Plan.” Regardless of how integrated and spiritual an experiencer may appear to be after the seventh year, all pales in comparison to the power unleashed if that second shift occurs.

With the adult experiencers in my study, the divorce rate was between 75 to 78%. Most of these divorces happened within seven to 10 years of the episode. The most common complaints from spouses were: “I don’t know this person any more,” or “This unconditional love nonsense is just an excuse to insult me by flirting with others.” A common attitude of the experiencer was, “Since I no longer fit in, I’ll move on.” The general mindset was that significant others were convinced that the experiencer was out-of-touch with reality, while the experiencer became convinced that significant others were slow to more forward and were not interested in making changes. It was as if the two groups started speaking different languages and could no longer communicate effectively.

Even considering this, the average experiencer usually refuses assistance or therapy. Regardless of how much it is needed, help is likely to be turned down. It is a rare experiencer (myself included) who clearly perceives the extent of behavior changes that others see. It is difficult to help someone who is unaware that anything is amiss.

Sometimes an experiencer is lucky enough to find a therapist who is also an experiencer. When this happens, there is generally instant rapport and miracles happen.

Those professionals who tend to have the best record working with adult experiencers are the ones trained in transpersonal psychology. With children, those who employ feeling-based techniques are usually

more successful. Here in brief are some techniques that I have noticed are effective with near-death experiencers:

Hypnosis, but only with hypnotists who avoid “leading” questions that predetermine results.

Philosophical Counseling, where the broader scope of satisfaction and meaning become the lens used for viewing life.

Life Coach, where a personal growth specialist inspires thought and action aimed at developing the fullness of potential.

Inner Life Mentoring, developed by psychotherapist G. Scott Sparrow, where the therapist becomes a mentor and the client a student (Atwater, 1999).

Soul Retrieval, a shamanic practice of “going into spirit” to locate and re-unite fragmented pieces of the client’s “self.” Also called “spirit release therapy.” (Ingerman, 1991).

Feeling-Based Therapies, such as sand tray or shadow box therapy.

Art Therapy, involving such things as shaping pottery on a potter’s wheel, puppet shows, finger painting, and drawing/interpreting mandalas (Kelllogg, 1978).

The most beneficial therapy I have found, however, was designed by near-death experiencer Robert Stefani as part of his project for his master’s degree at California State University, California (U.S.). His “Eclectic Group Intervention” covers a ten-session program (Atwater, 2007). According to Stefani:

Group participants need not be limited exclusively to near-death experiencers. Family members and close friends of experiencers may need support, too, as well as people who are losing (or have lost) a loved one, who have questions about death, or who are themselves dying.

The main goals of Stefani’s intervention program are:

Educate the experiencer to understand that the interpersonal changes that may have taken place in their attitudes and beliefs are not signs of mental instability or psychotic disorder. Redefine normality.

Help the experiencer to integrate changes in attitudes, beliefs, values, and interests with the expectations of family and friends.

Alleviate interpersonal fears of separation and rejection by assisting the experiencer in learning to communicate with significant others who have not shared the experience.

Reconcile the new spiritual transformation based on universality, oneness, and unconditional love with prior religious beliefs.

Overcome difficulty with maintaining former life rules that no longer seem significant, and reconstruct a purposeful life balanced between the aftereffects and the demands of everyday living.

Address the dissolution of major relationships or careers if the experiencer finds it impossible to reconcile these with changes that have been undergone.

Accept the limitations of others in human relationships in spite of one's personal feelings of unconditional love gained through the experience.

Utilize the gifts and insight gained through the experience to help comfort those who are dying, grieving the loss of a loved one, or learning to accept their own experience.

The power of the near-death phenomenon lies not in its storylines nor in any “superstar” individual’s achievements, but in what occurs because the story ever happened. As persuasive as near-death reports are about life beyond death, in truth, these reports reveal much more about the amazing, absolutely awesome aliveness life has. The revelations from near-death states challenge societies around the globe to reassess and re-

define what is presently known about human faculties, the broad sweep of mind, and the presence of soul.

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