

AFTEREFFECTS OF  
NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES:  
A SURVIVAL MECHANISM HYPOTHESIS

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Thanks to the medical developments of the past half-century, the world today contains literally millions of people who, like me, have returned to active life from the brink of death—and according to a Gallup poll published in the early 1980s (Gallup, 1982), a substantial proportion of us have very strange tales to tell about the experience. I am relating mine here because I believe the real significance of these “near-death experiences” (or NDEs, as they’re now called by medical researchers) has been missed by most of the stories about them in the popular media.

These almost always focus on experiences which seem like “journeys out of the body.” For instance, there are reports from accident or heart-attack victims of looking down on an apparently lifeless corpse which they recognize with surprise as their own. Or there are accounts of floating through a dark tunnel and emerging into a wonderful new world beyond, only to be told by a godlike being, or a long-deceased relative, “You must go back. Your work on earth is not yet done.”

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Journalists naturally pick on reports like these as pointers to possible life after death—which inevitably provokes arguments from sceptics, even from many who are sympathetic to the idea of immortality. The brain can’t *really* have experienced dying if it revives, they say—and how can we take such visions seriously as visits to another world, when some people describe a heavenly rural landscape with white-robed figures straight out of Sunday-school picture-books, others say they saw sci-fi-type cities, and yet others tell of a pure light experience which somehow convinces them of reincarnation. Isn’t fantasy a more likely explanation?—to

which the experiencers reply that no dream or fantasy could be so real . . . and so it goes.

But over the past few years some researchers have begun to turn their attention to another aspect of NDEs that doesn't raise this kind of argument, namely, the remarkable aftereffects of the experiences in *this* life (Ring, 1984; Flynn, 1987; Sutherland, 1992). While NDEs in themselves differ widely—and many, mine included, are nothing like “otherworld journeys” or trips out of the body—they almost always leave the experiencers freer, happier people than they've ever before dreamed possible. There's a radical change in life-quality which is far more than exuberant relief at escaping death. Indeed, it can happen to people who have an NDE close to the end of a terminal illness: they come out of it with a sense of great happiness and calm, even though they're subject to pain and know very well that their final death experience (FDE?) is coming soon.

Moreover, while this new-found capacity for joy in living seems to drive all NDE-ers to use religious language in trying to do it justice, it doesn't necessarily involve any particular conviction that the soul is going to survive the body's death. *It's more like a basic shift in consciousness whereby life in each moment becomes so vivid that anxiety about future survival, in the body or out of it, simply ceases to be important.* Researchers are coming to believe that the discovery of this potential in consciousness may revolutionize human understanding of what living and dying, health and happiness, perhaps even matter and spirit, are really all about. And this was precisely the conclusion I reached, quite independently, from my own extraordinary experience after I was revived from near-death by poisoning in Thailand in 1983, my sixtieth year.

The poisoning was quite a story in itself, but this is not the place for travellers' tales (for a full account, see Wren-Lewis, 1996), so I'll simply warn any would-be visitors to countries like Thailand to remember Mother's advice—“Never take sweets from strangers.” Drugs like morphine, heroin or cocaine are so cheap in such places that ordinary thieves can use them in sweets or drinks simply to put foreign travellers to sleep so that wallets or bags can be unobtrusively purloined and taken off at intermediate stops. Normally the unfortunate tourist gets shaken awake by the bus- or train-conductor at journey's end and then discovers the robbery, but the thief I encountered had evidently been overenthusiastic with the morphine he'd injected into his Cadbury's toffees. The doctors told me afterwards that my coma indicated a potentially fatal dose, and there'd been some hours during which they thought I'd gone.

What I knew was that I'd emerged from something quite unlike any previous experience of sleep or dreaming. It was a kind of black-

ness, yet the absolute opposite of blankness, for it was the most alive state I've ever known—intensely happy, yet also absolutely peaceful, since it seemed to be utterly complete in itself, leaving nothing to be desired. It was an almost solid darkness, but not so much absence of light as lack of any need for light. Light, after all, is primarily the means by which we perceive things outside ourselves, whereas this aliveness seemed to involve no separate selfhood at all.

Lying there on the hospital bed after coming round, I found myself appreciating a phrase of mystical poetry which I'd hitherto dismissed as meaningless—“a deep but dazzling darkness.” It occurred to me for the first time in my life that when mystics have applied expressions like this to “God” or “Absolute Pure Being,” they may not have been indulging in abstract metaphysical word-spinning, but rather trying to describe an actual experience—the discovery that just behind our ordinary individual consciousness is this other “impersonal” kind of consciousness which seems universal and infinite in its total self-sufficiency.

Indeed, for me that phrase “*behind* ordinary individual consciousness” was almost literally true; that Shining Dark from which I'd emerged was *still right there at the back of my head.* I'm not talking about any vague impression: it was so palpable that I kept putting my hand up to make sure the back of my skull was still there. I felt for all the world as if the doctors had sawn it off and exposed my brain to the dark infinity of space—or perhaps had implanted something like one of those “black holes” astronomers talk about, in which light just vanishes because it's fallen in upon itself with unbelievable intensity. And strange though that feeling was, there was nothing frightening about it: on the contrary, it felt like a liberation, as if I'd had some kind of brain-cataract removed, making unobscured perception possible for the first time.

For that dazzling darkness behind me did indeed transform my perception of the outside world, and here, too, I'm driven to religious or mystical language in trying to do the experience justice. The peeling paint on the hospital walls, the ancient sheets on the bed, the smell from the nearby toilet, the other patients chattering or coughing, the nurses and the indifferent curry they brought me for supper, my own somewhat traumatized middle-aged body, even my racing, bewildered mind—all were imbued with that sense of utter nothing-to-be-desired completeness, *because “not I, but the Shining Dark within me,” was perceiving them.*

My individual consciousness continued to function in all the usual ways, from dealing with practical matters like talking with the doctors or eating supper, to thinking, “This can't be happening to me—I don't believe in mystical experiences!” and, “Hey, could

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this be the kind of change they talk about after NDEs?—I always thought they were just having flights of fancy.” But behind and through this personal consciousness, that other impersonal consciousness *seemed to know everything from the inside*. The closest I can get to putting this into words is to say that I seemed to be perceiving everything very sharply from an immense distance—somewhat like the way objects appear when viewed through the wrong end of a telescope—yet at the same time I had the uncanny sense that I actually *was* each thing perceiving itself.

Or, to put it in another way, that consciousness-behind-the-mind seemed to know everything with love, though not in any emotional sense. This was no “transport of bliss,” but something like the sense I sometimes get when rereading a particularly well-written passage of my own earlier writing—a paradoxical combination of total familiarity with surprised satisfaction. Everything around me seemed continually *new*, as if it came fresh-minted out of the Dark now! and now! and now!, to be re-recognized by the Dark with a creator’s delight. I found myself thinking, in a way I’d never even considered before, of the Bible’s opening chapters, where the forms of all things are said to emerge from “darkness on the face of the deep,” to be looked upon by the infinite consciousness called God and found “very good.”

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My incredulity at all this, as I lay in the hospital that night, would have been squared had I known that it wasn’t just a one-time mystical experience, but a permanent change of consciousness that would still be with me now in 1994, with no signs of diminishing. I don’t mean that I’m permanently *in* the “mystical” state, though I wish I were. Every day I drift out of it from time to time, and go back to perceiving life in the old way for minutes or even hours at a stretch *without even noticing*. But sooner or later I always wake up to the fact that something vital is missing, whereupon I immediately snap right back into the mystical consciousness again, as if it were now my baseline.

And I must emphasize that there’s nothing remotely misty or dreamy about it, nor is it an ecstatic state like a psychedelic “high.” I can speak with first-hand knowledge here, since I participated in a long series of high-dosage psychedelic experiments in England in the late 1960s. I had some remarkable experiences (Wren-Lewis, 1971), but none was even remotely like this state of quintessential equanimity and stability—and none ever lasted beyond a day or two, let alone for months or years. The new consciousness that came with the NDE is marvellous, yet also carries the sense of being completely ordinary and obvious: in fact when I’m it, the real marvel seems to be that the world isn’t experienced like this by everyone all the time, since this is, quite simply, the way things are.

My feeling now is that so-called normal human consciousness is in some way cramped or blinkered.

What is more, in contrast to the psychedelic “high” state, the mystical consciousness actually enables me to function better in daily life than I ever did before, because I no longer feel myself to be a closed-off individual struggling to gain satisfaction from a world that is “not-me.” The change is a subtle one, in keeping with that sense of absolute ordinariness: I haven’t, for example, become anything like my own earlier stereotypes of the mystic or “enlightened being.” I haven’t lost my taste for meat or wine or humor or detective fiction, or good company; I still feel sexual pleasure, I still enjoy being appreciated by others, and my scientific curiosity is as great as ever. In fact all these things seem “very good” as never before—but I’m no longer bothered to *pursue* any of them, nor much worried when such desires aren’t met, since in the new consciousness, satisfaction is the basic essence of existence itself, not the result of desire-gratification.

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So while I still make choices and pursue goals, this has become for me a kind of secondary game, not the focus of living. Experiences I formerly put up with as second-best, or as necessary chores, I now find every bit as good in their own way as the things my body-mind habitually prefers, though I still choose the latter whenever I can do it without much trouble. To begin with, I found this “detachment” from personal preferences a continuous occasion for astonishment, and in many ways I’m still adjusting to the practicalities of living from this consciousness; but the more I do it, the freer life becomes from the conflicts, anxieties, and stresses attendant upon the illusion of separate selfhood. I think this must be what the mystics of ancient China meant by learning to flow with the *Tao*—and with my scientific hat on, I wish to record the observation that it seems to be not just a happier mode of existence, but also physically healthier. I feel a greater sense of well-being than in the past, and fall ill less often.

But perhaps my greatest astonishment has come in observing how the new consciousness transforms even experiences I formerly found downright ugly or unpleasant. It began when I discovered myself positively enjoying foods and music I’d hated before, and appreciating real beauty in dirty industrial sites—an appreciation which in no way lessens my practical concern that such sites be changed wherever possible. My mind really boggled, however, when I went on to experience pleasure in the sensations of a heavy cold, and in the tinitus (hissing in the ears) which afflicts me in damp weather and had previously driven me crazy when I couldn’t distract myself from it with external sounds. The need to push back my protruding gut through a long-standing hernia gradually be-

came a source of fun rather than suffering, even though my practical desire to get the hernia cured at the earliest convenient moment remains undiminished, just as I'm glad when a cold has run its course.

These changes were particularly mind-boggling for me (and for my friends) because I've always been a notorious coward about pain and discomfort of any kind. And I'm emphatically *not* saying that the new consciousness turns me into Instant Hero, any more than it has made me into an ascetic or a saint. I've no idea whether I could find any enjoyment in really serious pain or disablement, and I've no wish to be put to the test, not even in the interests of science: better men than I have hoped to avoid drinking from the cup of suffering! But I *can* report that at the relatively minor, yet still very real levels of pain which have come my way from life's little accidents, or from the vicissitudes of the aging body (including a duodenal ulcer), or from such routine occasions as the dentist's chair, the mystical consciousness has gradually changed the nature of the experience in a most interesting way.

Specifically, I now experience such pain in the way nature must surely "mean" it to be experienced, namely as a signal of something to be avoided if possible, or of an organ not functioning properly. I've found that the painful stimulus remains unpleasant precisely so long as I ignore the signal, which of course we all tend to do with pains like foot-corns, headaches, stomach pains, muscular cramps and suchlike—we push them to the edge of consciousness and try to carry on regardless, whereupon they continue to nag away and make life generally miserable. I've learned, however, that if I make a rule always to attend to the signal immediately and resolve to take remedial action as soon as possible, *the quality of the sensation changes to a rather interesting vibration, suffused with a sense of awe at this marvellous neural device for monitoring the body's workings.*

This happens even when there's nothing that can be done to get practical relief immediately for the condition causing the pain (for instance, if a foot-corn begins hurting on a hike). The change comes with *attention* and the *resolution* to take practical action as soon as possible—and I've been fascinated to observe that when such attention is regularly given to painful conditions arising from organic malfunction, like corns or stomach-ulcers or flu symptoms, *the conditions themselves seem to heal more quickly than they used to do.* Could this be a clue to the way spiritual healing works? And could the change in the character of the pain-signal be the secret behind stories of saints giving praise to God even under torture? From my limited experience I wouldn't dare make any firm claims on such issues, but I'm quite sure there's at least an element of truth—and a very important one—in the "metaphysical" idea that

suffering and disease may be products of distorted or blocked consciousness rather than brute facts of nature.

And, in trying to understand what's involved here, I'm sure there's a significant clue in the fact that my own liberation from "blocked consciousness" came after my close encounter with death. I believe this liberation, into what I call the Dark and others call eternity, God, the Tao or whatever, is the life-changing core of all near-death experiences. This sometimes gets translated by the experiencer's mind into visionary pictures of leaving the body or going to heaven (as his/her mind imagines heaven to be). I've spent the past eight years researching and following up this clue, mainly by using myself as a guinea-pig, and exploring and recording how the new consciousness responds to various life-circumstances (e.g., Wren-Lewis, 1985). I've also been able to compare my observations with the findings of worldwide research on NDEs, since my participation in 1984 on a Research Panel of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), based at the University of Connecticut.

The hypothesis I've come up with is that the block which cuts off so-called normal human consciousness from its roots in that other, impersonal consciousness, is *some kind of inflation or hyperactivity of the psychological survival-system.* Exactly how or when this originated in the history of our species I have no idea, and at present don't propose to speculate. But the effect of this hyper-defensiveness is to focus individual consciousness so rigidly on the business of securing its own future that the underlying universal consciousness, with its every-present-moment happiness, peace and wonder, gets shut out. The only satisfaction allowed into awareness is that which comes from meeting the needs (or supposed needs) of the individual body-mind, while pain becomes wholly negative suffering instead of a life-enhancing signal. And this basic malfunction is epitomized in the fact that dying, which in nature is simply part of life's great flow (or of that secondary game called individual manifestation), becomes the object of ultimate fear and horror, with all the catastrophic psycho-social consequences to which Ernest Becker and others have directed attention (Becker, 1973).

Close encounter with death is able to break this whole spell *because the survival-mechanism gives up at this point*—which I'm sure is why the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz, 1960) calls the dying-moment a time of special grace when Nirvana can suddenly become apparent to anyone. And this is why some who return from the brink of death have been privileged to come back knowing what consciousness really is—knowledge which, once acquired, enable the survival-mechanisms to resume functioning without their former hyperactivity. I've observed that, since Thai-

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land, my feeling about death, my own included, is that, although I still intend to avoid it as long as possible in life's secondary game and still mourn the loss of friends, it has in itself a very special kind of beauty, like the dying leaves of autumn, whose splendor we are allowed to see in ordinary consciousness because our minds don't associate it with the ultimate taboo. A corollary of this changed attitude to death has been the discovery that aging, including even its more obvious decay-aspects, has become interesting rather than depressing or disgusting.

The big question now, of course, is whether there are less drastic (and less haphazard) means by which the spell of separated selfhood can be lifted *before* the moment of death, and I hope my research may eventually shed some light on this. For while there are mystical traditions the world over which offer "paths to higher consciousness," it doesn't seem to me that any of them has a very encouraging success rate in bringing about the kind of liberation which NDEs can bring immediately to anyone, high or low, good or bad, believing or unbelieving, trained or untrained. In fact, my studies of these traditions, ancient and modern alike, suggest that while there are almost always valuable insights to be gained from them, they all get bogged down in their own basic idea of a "path," which inevitably suggests that "higher consciousness" is a goal to be achieved, *thereby reinforcing that very preoccupation with one's personal future which is the cause of all the trouble* (Wren-Lewis, 1991).

My experience, and that of NDE-ers generally, suggests that liberation isn't at all a matter of taking "the long voyage Home." It simply means waking up to the consciousness which is *already* the basis of our very existence, but is, as G.K. Chesterton used to put it, so large and close and obvious that it escapes notice. What I suspect we need is not any kind of path or discipline, but a collection of tricks or devices for catching the Dark at the corner of the eye, as it were, and learning how to spot its just-waiting-to-be-seen presence, combined with strategies for stopping the hyperactive survival-programs from immediately explaining the perception away. D.E. Harding's exercises for discovering one's own essential "headlessness" are the best ideas I've yet come across for the first half of this process, but, by his own admission, most people "get it but simply don't believe it" (Harding, 1961, 1988, 1990, 1992); this, I suspect, is precisely evidence of the survival-program at work, and in my view there is no more important task facing transpersonal psychology than research into techniques for circumventing this fundamental malfunction in humanity's "software." Compared with this, conventional parapsychological research aimed at trying to mine NDEs for hard evidence of nonmaterial consciousness is a mere backwater, akin to Christopher Columbus

thinking he'd found India and missing out on a whole new continent (Wren-Lewis, 1993).

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