

The Myth of the Near-Death Journey

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Have you built your ship of death, O have you?
O build your ship of death, for you will need it.
D.H. Lawrence, "The Ship of Death" (1965, p. 139)

There is a difference between one and another hour of life in their authority and subsequent effect. Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual. Yet there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-Soul" (1883, p. 171)

ABSTRACT: I examine in this article the meaning and developmental potential of the near-death experience (NDE) as a stimulus to inner exploration. The NDE as a prototype of the transcendent contact encounter offers a model for an evolutionary theory of religion. My own experiences and contemporary portrayals of NDEs suggest that the experience is a vehicle for the mythic renewal of our idea of death as a journey rather than as a termination, and may be a stimulus for spiritual revolution.

When in 1975 I stumbled upon Raymond Moody's *Life After Life* (1975) and reviewed it for the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* (Grosso, 1976), I had no idea the book I favorably reviewed would become a bestseller and, more importantly, would inspire a new area of research with a special journal devoted to it. Indeed, I had the honor of having my article "Toward an Explanation

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of Near-Death Phenomena" (Grosso, 1981) lead off the first issue of the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* (then known as *Anabiosis*). So I am delighted that Bruce Greyson, editor of the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, has invited me to contribute an article to this tenth anniversary issue.

In casting about for a theme, I decided to offer a meditation on the near-death journey. I use the word "journey" because the near-death experience (NDE) is so often a stimulus to inner travels and explorations. Meditating on an experience, as I see it, is going with the experience, trying to get the feel of it from the inside, unfolding, unraveling its meanings, exploring its developmental possibilities.

I am not a medical professional nor a psychologist but a philosopher interested in the nature of mind. I am especially interested in unusual mind-related occurrences—miraculous, paranormal, or anomalous. I am interested in these phenomena because they often transform people's lives, and because of what they may tell us about human beings and the world we live in. Although I have never conducted organized studies of anomalous phenomena (I am indebted to those who have), I have talked at length with many who have had NDEs and other remarkable experiences. I've also had a fair share of my own remarkable experiences. So I consider myself a fellow traveler with those on the near-death journey.

I would like to recount one of my personal experiences that may bear on the NDE. A "great" dream, as I define it, is intensely vivid and meaningful to the dreamer, and seems to come from beyond the boundaries of the personal self; it is the kind of dream that burns itself into the memory, leaving a kind of inner landmark, a pointer to future developments.

In a "great" dream I once had (in press, a), I had to build a boat. To get the wood for this boat I entered the tomb of George Washington. I had to ransack the tomb of a great man, break up the wood of his coffin to build my boat. Much to my surprise I found a coffin within a coffin; before my eyes coffin within coffin appeared, each one becoming more lifelike in appearance.

Out of the last small red-leathery coffin leaped a scarlet beetle, or scarab. I watched the scarab hop away. In the dream I followed the creature, and suddenly found myself hauling a boat—or was it a coffin? I was hauling it up a hill that sloped against a clear blue sky. Then—and here was the "great" moment of my dream—the sun rose over the hill. I looked up at the sun and a brilliant ray of golden light shot into my heart. The warm ray penetrated, seeping through every cell of my

consciousness. In that moment I experienced a bliss that begged description.

I had this dream over twenty years ago, and can still remember it vividly. The intensity has faded, but the image and sense of an altogether higher state of being remain indelibly intact. Never before or since have I experienced such bliss—such a feeling of perfect love.

This dream reminds me of the near-death narratives, the meetings with the beings of light, we hear about so often. My dream experience also helps me get a handle on those luminous raptures reported in the literature of mystical experience. The dream is there, a point of reference, a place to go back to, a bright weathervane I can use to orient my inner wanderings as well as my outer researches.

This experience—however fleeting and private—is often at the back of my mind when I read stories of the NDE. I find myself asking all sorts of questions. For example, is it possible that being physically near death is only one of many routes to this remarkable experience? Might the NDE be just one perspective on a more fundamental experience? Could we in dreams, in meditation, even in drug-induced states glimpse this world we have come to know through the typical NDE?

Perhaps the experience in question is potentially present to all of us all the time, inwardly accessible, and just needs the right stimulus for us to gain entry. That entry gained, the contents of this inward universe of forms might reveal itself to us in more than one way. Perhaps there is more than one way the archetypal near-death experience may be experienced.

Researchers have noticed the overlap of NDEs with mystical experiences. Others have noticed possible connections with the unidentified flying object (UFO) experience (Davis, 1988). What has struck me were similarities to the phenomenology of UFO “contactee” encounters. Kenneth Ring and Christopher Rosing (1990) have recently begun to look at links between NDEs and alien abduction stories. Other candidates for the possibility that the NDE is one type on a continuum of similars include encounters with “angels” and visions of the “Blessed Virgin Mary.”

The NDE may offer a natural prototype of such experiences—a kind of code for unlocking the whole continuum. Indeed, the NDE as the natural prototype of a continuum of transcendent contact encounters may offer a model for an evolutionary theory of religion. In *Frontiers of the Soul* (in press, b), I attempted to sketch this theory, and try, for example, to shed light on Saint Paul’s conversion and the ancient Greek Eleusinian Mysteries by the psychodynamics of NDEs. So for

me the study of the NDE has been a stepping-stone toward wider speculations on human consciousness.

But to return to my “near-death” dream: meditating on this experience, I feel myself pulled from theory or organized research. Given the “NDE matrix”—the inner resources oriented around images of rebirth, renewal, renovation—we have two options: we can move horizontally toward widening our conceptual grasp of the phenomena or we can move—and I think this is the spontaneous response—vertically, down into the subjective mythic depths of the experience. For the moment I want to pursue the latter.

I believe that this vertical plunge into the meaning, feeling, and state-specificity of the NDE is part of its spontaneous trajectory. If, as some writers have suggested, there is an evolutionary potential to NDEs, then perhaps we are not meant to analyze the experience. The evolutionary function of the NDE might better be served by a more synthetic epistemology.

This would imply that the “truth”—different from the explanation—of the NDE is what we make of it. The NDE, viewed from this perspective, invites us to engage it on its terms; it asks for a poetic, in the sense of creative, response.

For one thing, this would mean trying to maintain an internal point of departure. From an internal standpoint, I try to understand the NDEs of others. Now, my dream was not an NDE. Yet in several nontrivial ways it was very much like an NDE. Like an NDE, it gave me a taste of something I can only lamely call cosmic love. True, I wasn’t literally near death, yet in my dream I did undergo a kind of symbolic death.

I found myself dragging a coffin up a hill. But the form of the coffin, it turned out, also suggested a boat. In the universe of dream and myth, forms take on different meanings very quickly. Nothing is entirely solid, as in physical space, where a stone is a stone or a tree a tree. Not so in the world of dreams, where things are fluid and boundaries forever shifting. There a coffin can become a boat.

This puts a different spin on the meaning on death. It opens death up—turns it into a “boat”—the symbol of a journey. And since a boat would not be a boat without water, the dream leads to associations with lakes, rivers, seas. As I meditate, go with the flow of associations, I am carried back to the oldest tale of the human race—the story of Gilgamesh who crossed “the waters of death”—searching for Utnapishtim the Faraway One, the man who survived the Flood and knew the secret of immortality.

I had this dream when I was a graduate student at Columbia University and was busy absorbing the reigning philosophy of scientific materialism. Carl Jung's claustrophobic "boxed in" metaphysics was triumphant in the halls of that venerable institution. The chief method of the prevailing school of philosophy was analytic. I suspect that some part of me saw this exclusive focus on analysis as an imitation of entropy: a philosophy of dissection, destruction, death.

Apparently, the "teacher" in my deep unconscious meant to give me a different lesson in metaphysics. Contrary to the dogma that death is extinction, the dream told me that death was a voyage after all—the main symbolic equation of the dream being *coffin=boat*. That reading is further reinforced by the fact that deep inside the coffin I found a scarab—an Egyptian symbol of immortality.

At the time I had no knowledge of the scarab as an Egyptian symbol or of the image of a coffin within a coffin—also a motif in Egyptian myth. Yet themes from this myth of the Sun God Ra appeared in my dream. It seems the imagery came from somewhere deeper than my personal unconscious. Of course, I cannot prove this; I may have picked it all up unconsciously. In either case, the impact of the dream was tremendous; as far as aftereffects, what counts is not the explanation but the quality of the experience.

Now, the modern rational mind sees death as the end, a "grim reaper," a cul-de-sac; but my great dream and the typical near-death experience—emerging spontaneously as they seem to from a deep, perhaps collective layer of mind—tell a different story: death, seen through the eyes of the unconscious, becomes a boat, a voyage, a journey into the light, a love embrace with the universe.

This is an important point. A widespread pattern of experiences due to modern resuscitation technology, the NDE has become an avenue to a source of mythic renewal of our idea of death. It is as if some older, perhaps prehistoric stratum of mind, seeking a window, an inlet—and against the dictates of modern science—would force its way back into popular consciousness. This older stratum, erupting with its confounding signals and enchanting images, wants us to invert the picture of reality that has been constructed by modern science, and make us see death as a tunnel into a world beyond. The official academic view would have us see death as a hole in the ground, a grave, a dead-end.

So this is one way to think of the meaning of the near-death experience: in terms of what it is doing to us, reviving—not in a rational or objective way, but at a grass roots level of popular consciousness—the living world of the mythic journey. The new (yet very old) myth that is

crystallizing out of modern NDEs—millions if the polls are right—is telling us in no uncertain terms that death is a journey.

The image of death emerging from millions of unconscious minds is clear: it radically reverses “logic,” common sense, and ordinary science. It substitutes light for dark, joy for grief, movement for stagnation; it affirms the claims of ancient visionaries from Zoroaster to Saint Paul and Plotinus. And it is doing so in the form of a living myth.

There is no question about the reality of this emerging myth. Let me give a few examples of recent movies that are woven from strands of the new near-death mythology. In addition to sitcoms and sci-fi and fantasy shorts on television the core imagery of NDEs has appeared in such movies as *Return of the Jedi* (Marquand, 1983), *Resurrection* (Petrie, 1980), *All That Jazz* (Fosse, 1979), *Peggy Sue Got Married* (Coppola, 1986), *Jo Jo Dancer* (Pryor, 1986), *Bliss* (Lawrence, 1985), *Ghost* (Zucker, 1990), *Flatliners* (Schumacher, 1990), and *Jacob's Ladder* (Lyne, 1990). The recent movie *Jacob's Ladder* (Lyne, 1990) has irked and puzzled many viewers by its confusing shifts from reality to surreality, but the confusion vanishes once you realize that the entire film is about an afterdeath journey.

Let me describe a few details in one or two of these films to illustrate how near-death motifs are appearing in our contemporary mythic consciousness.

In Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz* (1979), a frenetic womanizing choreographer was taken through several Code Blues; the hero kept bumping into Moody's “being of light,” appropriately portrayed as a beautiful woman in white.

In *Resurrection* (Petrie, 1980), in a touching performance, Ellen Burstyn became a healer after her brush with death. Unfortunately, she was treated as a witch by local fundamentalists. Repressed daughter, repressed psychic, she tried to soften the hard heart of her father, a man sadly impervious to the light of unconditional love. Her post-near-death enlightenment, paradoxically, threatened to ruin her; the world is not prepared for unconditional love nor for ideologically non-aligned healing power.

This power, unaligned and undefined, provoked intense anxiety in a Bible-thumping hick chillingly played by Sam Shepherd who, in the name of a jealous God, attempted to blow her brains out. In the end, the force released by the near-death epiphany went underground; attempts to heal the world were forced to take the form of covert actions. Anything resembling real “resurrection” turned out to be dangerous and illegal.

In the movie, *Jo Jo Dancer* (Pryor, 1986), going out of the body during an NDE became for Richard Pryor a metaphor for looking at life from a detached viewpoint. The out-of-body experience became a way of self-rediscovery, getting a grip on the elusive implications latent but normally hidden in one's life.

After glimpsing the whole pattern of his life, the comic hero in *Jo Jo Dancer* regained his will to live. Outside his hospital room—to ease his rite of passage back—a bevy of beauties waited for him. On stage before an enthusiastic audience, he mimed the death of his old self: *The End*, amid applause and laughter. Near-death was portrayed as a comic rite of passage, a tool of conversion from the old to the new man: another step in the reeducation of the imagination of death.

A similar device was used in Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol* (1843/1983). (Dickens was interested in psychical research, a new discipline in the early 1880's established by a small group of Cambridge scholars.) In the Dickens story, a man, at high risk of losing his soul, also stepped out of his cantankerous bodily self. One by one, the spirits of past, present, and future took him on a trip into various aspects of his repressed and disfigured life. He put up a fight but eventually gained some special insights into himself. In this way Ebenezer Scrooge became a new man. And so do people on the threshold of death often claim to watch their whole lives, or the significant highpoints, unroll before them in the ultimate "movie" flashback.

But to come back to contemporary movies: with the award-winning Australian film, *Bliss* (Lawrence, 1985), based on the novel by William Carey, the near-death experience became a symbol of planetary decay and renewal. I would like to dwell on this extraordinary but little-noticed film. Here the humor was quite black, blacker than Pryor's; the imagery grotesque, baroque, surreal. *Bliss* added to the new cinematic mythology of near-death by weaving into the narrative items underplayed by researchers: the hellish side of near-death.

The hero of *Bliss*, Harry Joy, an amiable chap who liked to tell stories, had a heart attack after a drinking party. His (invisible) double promptly ascended among the trees; then drifted further into a world of undersea images of exotic beauty and repulsive horror. After it all, Harry was never the same again. There was no attempt to reproduce the typical imagery reported in near-death experiences; no beings of light, no whirling through tunnels, no encounters with demised relations or celestial welcoming committees. Instead, the film embroidered a private mythology of life after death—more importantly, of the living death that was Harry's life.

Harry's world was shot through with deception, infidelity, incest, cancer, insanity, suicide. His life, in short, was permeated by death, bodily and spiritual.

Having a near-death experience, one no longer lives at life's surface; one becomes a psychic amphibian, floating precariously between worlds. Dream and reality melt into each other. *Bliss* underscored this liquefaction of ontological boundaries. It showed how dreams, fantasies, lies mingle promiscuously with truth and external reality.

While Harry was recovering from his heart attack in the hospital, his wife made love to his business partner on a table in a public restaurant. Corruption was totally visible but nobody noticed or cared. The point was that Harry, thanks to the "bliss" of near-death, had distanced himself from the tangle of deception that was his life. Harry's near-death, as taught by ancient philosophers and mystery rites, became a vehicle for transforming insight.

Bliss portrayed family life, derelict from the order of nature. After his near-death episode, Harry caught his daughter performing fellatio on his son, who made his pocket money selling cocaine. She of course did not perform this service out of sisterly affection; she did it for the cocaine. We begin to appreciate the savage irony of the title, *Bliss*.

The closer you get to death the simpler your sense of good and evil. Harry, after his brush with mortality, decided to "do good." He began doing good by opposing certain carcinogenic policies of his advertising company. Images of a carcinogenic apocalypse pervade *Bliss*. Meanwhile, he fell in love with a prostitute. His wife was diagnosed as having cancer and, in a final act evoking Valhalla and the Crucifixion, blew herself up at a company board meeting.

Harry retired to the wilderness with his new girlfriend. Like Scrooge, he lived on to old age. At film's end he died again. The camera led us upward, again taking us on a gentle out-of-body flotation. This time there would be no return. His granddaughter spoke his epitaph: "He planted trees," she said. "He told stories." *Bliss* ended on this note. The road to the new Eden was through death. Death in the movies here turned into a symbol of planetary rebirth.

I am describing—not prescribing—what seems in so many cases to result from this experience. The near-death experience is about the unfolding of new life. In a recent film in which I was interviewed, several NDErs described specific changes they underwent (O'Reilly, 1991).

One man wrote ads for television, but quit after having his NDE; his former work now seemed meaningless. He started an organization for

helping gifted children. This was his way of living his mythic journey. Another experiencer chose to end her marriage; the relationship had become meaningless. Measured against the memory of her near-death encounter, divorce from her ordinary existence became a necessity; this was her way of living the myth of the journey.

Another woman suddenly found herself with clairvoyant powers, which met with disapproval from the priest of her local church. This prompted the woman to break from her church, to embark on her own spiritual journey, and move on to explore a wider universe. Her journey was to explore new forms of perception, new ways of knowing the world, moving beyond the restraints of standard rationality, the commandments of standard religiosity.

For many the NDE serves as a tool of deconstruction. Deconstruction of ordinary reality is important in developing a new outlook on life. For anyone interested in the evolutionary potential of NDEs and related experiences, this deconstructive effect is worthy of attention.

As a source of renewal of one's personal mythology, the NDE seems to help us let go of the world we construct through ordinary experience. Thanks to the transformative NDE, we reinvent the rules of the reality game, capsizing the standard paradigms: in one person it deconstructs the money-making game (the NDEr who quit his job as an ad man); in another the conventional marriage game is delegitimized; in yet another it deconstructs two birds with one stone: the bird of scientific reason and the bird of dogmatic religion.

Add them all up, these raids on convention, these perhaps rough weanings from the habits of conventional value and perception, and you have a force in place for spiritual renewal, for spiritual revolution.

So the NDE does not have the earmarks of illusion or defensiveness. On the contrary, the NDE seems rather to lead to a liberating disillusionment—as in those who are disillusioned by their jobs, their relationships, their religions, their routine understandings of the world. These experiences have expansive potentials; they hold seeds of transformation. Not at all defensive, they lead to awakenings, openings, outreachings toward more, not less, reality.

I am trying to make explicit the mythic intentionality that seems at work in the NDE. I am not trying to explain it in the sense of reduce it to an *a priori* set of ideas or ontological presuppositions. I am rather, in a spirit of active imagination, trying to carry the myth forward, see where it wants to go, immerse myself in its *élan vital*, its meandering evolutionary impetus.

So let us enter into the flow of the near-death imagery. Instead of

trying to figure out whether it is an illusion or a defense mechanism or a phantasm conjured by some brain mechanism, let us enter into the mythic near-death journey and see where it leads us.

The experience itself gives a clue to the way to do this. Over and over we have heard it. Those involuntary visionaries who have glimpsed the higher regions and had their foretaste of paradise are, as Jung and countless others have said, depressed, angered, rebellious against the return to a flat soulless existence. Near-death travelers return to the ordinary world under protest, feeling at once cursed, haunted, and driven by memories of their brief brushes with paradise.

As one man told me who had a near-death experience: "I was given a new direction." The new direction was back to the world of light, love, meaning, away from the gray world of compromised ordinary reality.

The clue is in the revulsion. Georg Hegel wrote that contradiction is the force that moves things. The NDE contradicts our "fallen" existence. It points to a new way, a *vita nova*, a way to live the myth forward, a road to incarnating the vision of light. What, in practice, does that mean? It means to live all the deconstructions and dissolutions and divorces and alienations: to decathect the jobs without meaning, the marriages and alliances and affiliations that say nothing, confirm nothing of the vision.

The old world must die, says the myth of the near-death journey; therefore, all institutions, all religions and sciences, all forms of knowledge, all models, routines, categories, paradigms—whatever falsifies, fails to resonate with, or betrays the natural trajectory of the soul to its true source of renewal and wellbeing—all these things must submit to a rigorous critique. Their spell must be dissolved. We have to release our grip on the familiar world. If we want to live the myth of near-death resurrection, we have to question the old system of reality. How else can we join Gilgamesh in crossing the "waters of death" in quest of the secret of immortality?

But to travel the mythic journey of the near-death experience is not to commit suicide. Bruce Greyson (1981) has especially made this clear, thus indirectly confirming that the NDE is about rediscovering life.

The interviewees in Tim O'Reilley's film did anything but commit suicide. They refused the "suicidal" features of their everyday existence; they rejected the "death" that all-too-often conceals itself behind the commonplaces of life-and-business-as-usual, the soul-negating jobs, the false human relationships, the inauthentic institutional affiliations. The NDErs refused to commit suicide by denying their vision and conforming to a deadly reality, a false consciousness. These people

were exploring the myth of the near-death journey, making their own Gilgamesh journey, their own search for paradisaal renovation.

To set out, each in our own way, on the journey to discover paradise, the search to taste the flower of immortality: this, in my opinion, is the great teaching of the near-death experience. It is a call from the depths of a life-affirming Mind at Large to reset our priorities, leave the lies and tinsel behind and seek the impossible but necessary dream of heaven on earth. As I follow the images of the NDE, I find myself coming back to the belief that each of us stores an extraordinary power within, and that there are many inlets into a great sea of transforming life energies.

Once we set out on the near-death journey, however, we're pretty much on our own; we become transitional, marginal people. Each of us must, as D.H. Lawrence wrote, build our own ship of death. So a little courage is called for if we dare to live the myth of our near-death journey. Yet if we heed the word of the near-death visionaries, there is reason to believe that the universe is democratic in its bounty and has armed each of us with the inner resources for embarking on the journey, for heading toward the omega of our life potentials. For not only is there light at the end of the tunnel, not only are we closer to the light and capable of entering the light, but *we are the light*. That, in a nutshell, seems the supreme message.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay on *Self-Reliance* (1883b) takes on new meaning in view of what we may now surmise lies latent in all of us. "Trust thyself," wrote that free spirit, "every heart vibrates to that iron string" (p. 32). Millions of people having the same experience are telling us to trust ourselves—not our ideas or our beliefs, but the source of life that lies coiled in our own inner depths. There is a tremendous life force, a life light, a life tide within. The NDE is telling us to trust that light, that the way has been tried, that where things look gloomiest, darkest, most hopeless, there is really a hidden spring of light ahead. The NDE is calling us to "follow our bliss," to use the now famous words of Joseph Campbell (Campbell and Moyers, 1988, p. 91).

The experiencers come back to a broken world screaming in protest, horrified at falling out of the light. These feelings may be nature's way of reminding us we have forgotten that we are the light, that we have all that we really need. Revulsion at the shallowness of our lives may be the greatest gift, the greatest blessing of the near-death experience. For that revulsion reminds us of the need to make the break, to practice the philosophic "death" that Plato extolled—the death of our false relationship to everything.

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