

BOOK REVIEW

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A Farther Shore: How Near-Death and Other Extraordinary Experiences Can Change Ordinary Lives, by Yvonne Kason and Teri Degler. Toronto, Ontario: HarperCollins, 1996, \$26.00 hb, \$16.99 pb.

A rift in the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) has sometimes been felt between near-death experiencers on the one hand and near-death researchers and health care providers on the other. Experiencers in particular have decried scientific investigation or health care provision by professionals who have little or no personal knowledge of the near-death experience and, presumably, can relate only very superficially, if at all, to the often deeply profound quality of the experience. As a counselor, researcher, educator, and multiple transpersonal (but not near-death) experiencer, I have wished for a way to bridge the rift, in particular to promote awareness of the commonality between near-death experiences and other experiences of a transpersonal nature.

Now comes Yvonne Kason, a near-death experiencer, researcher, and health care provider. She has written what is, in my opinion, the single best existing book for anyone wanting to learn about near-death and other transpersonal experiences, how they relate to the process of spiritual development, and how hypothetically they are all manifestations of the same underlying phenomenon. In 1979, at the age of 26, Kason was in the final stages of her training as a physician at the University of Toronto. Her near-death experience occurred during a near-drowning in the icy waters of northern Canada. Eleven years later she became one of the founders of the Kundalini Research

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Network. Because she is all three in one, her perspective has much to teach us about, among other things, inclusivity in IANDS.

Kason opens her book with the account of her near-death experience (NDE). So much of the descriptive literature on NDEs consists of excerpts of portions of the experience, or whole experiences condensed to fit the space limitation of a journal or newsletter. For this reason, I luxuriated in Kason's detailed account, start to finish, that the space-unlimited medium of a book afforded her. Also, it was an aspect of her NDE that inspired the title for her book: Having reached the shore and pulled herself from the frigid waters in which her plane had crashed, in the weeks and months that followed, she became increasingly aware of, and impelled to swim the even greater distance to reach "transcendence, God-consciousness, the farther shore" (p. 59). With her NDE account, she succeeded in engaging me to read on. Hopefully, I leave readers of this review sufficiently enticed to acquire a copy of Kason's book and read her account for themselves.

In the second chapter, Kason introduces her term for transpersonal experiences: spiritually transformative experiences (STEs). During STEs, we become "capable of perceiving other levels of reality, including what we might consider mystical or paranormal dimensions" (p. 18). She differentiates between an STE, which is relatively mild, and an STEP, or STE peak, "a discrete, time-limited episode that is intensely absorbing or even overwhelming" (p. 18). Kason asserts that when someone has an STEP, he or she often takes a major step in spiritual development. Types of STEs and STEPs include mystical experiences, classical kundalini episodes, near-death experiences, psychic awakening, and inspired creativity and genius, each of which Kason details in Chapters 3 through 7.

Also in Chapter 2, Kason introduces her main hypothesis: that all STEs and STEPs are manifestations of one underlying spiritually transformative energy that, for reasons of tradition and utility, she terms *kundalini*. In Chapter 8, she provides a more thorough discussion of the kundalini hypothesis, that during the next step of human evolution "we will manifest an expanded range and higher states of consciousness" (p. 127). The hypothetical physiological mechanisms of this transformation are described, examples are given from the annals of near-death research and the life of Gopi Krishna, and implications are discussed.

In Chapter 9, Kason summarizes the findings to date of the Kundalini Research Project. Among the many interesting findings is that

people who report one type of STE typically report other types, which seems to support the kundalini hypothesis of one mechanism underlying all the phenomena.

In Chapters 10 through 12, Kason very thoroughly describes the varieties of physical, psychological, and spiritual phenomena that can characterize STEs and the process of spiritual development. These included lesser known, or lesser discussed, phenomena such as *kriyas*, or involuntary jerking movement of muscles, and changes in sexual energy and dream life. In Chapter 13 she addresses the topic of spiritual emergency, in which spiritual development crosses the line from manageable process to unmanageable crisis, as well as the crucial issue of differential diagnosis of spiritual emergency and psychosis. Why some people cross that line is addressed in Chapter 14. The topics of how to avoid crossing that line, primarily by consciously cultivating physical, psychological, and spiritual balance, and what to do if one does cross it, occupy the remaining three chapters of the book.

I found this book to be extremely thorough, well-organized, and clearly written. I took issue with only a few aspects of the book. One was the term STE. Several times throughout the book, Kason herself refers to the frequency, far from certainty, that an STE will result in spiritual transformation. For example, on p. 61 she writes, quite rightly, that NDEs are often spiritually transformative experiences. I have both read of and spoken with NDErs who either do not feel spiritually transformed or who report having repressed the transformative potential of the experience, sometimes for decades. If an experience is not always spiritually transformative, it cannot logically be called a Spiritually Transformative Experience! And to dichotomize STEs and STEPts on the basis of lesser or greater profoundness seems, to me, arbitrary. At the same time, the field of transpersonal psychology is so new that many writers have proposed their own taxonomies, such as Stanislav Grof's (1972) "transpersonal experiences" and Rhea White's (1998) "exceptional human experiences." Personally, I prefer the term "transpersonal experience." First, it includes any experience that transcends the normal ego boundaries of space and/or time, whether it be an experience of the intuitive, paranormal, mystical, or inspired creativity type. Second, it includes experiences on a continuous, rather than dichotomous, range of strength, depth, or profoundness. And third, it carries no implication about whether an experience will result in spiritual development or transformation, though it allows for the possibility that the more pro-

found the experience, the more likely spiritual transformation will follow. I think the preexisting term transpersonal experience would have been a better choice than STE.

Though Kason expresses near-perfect openness to and empathy for the varieties of symptoms and experiences she described, I was struck by one phrase that sounded, to me, quite judgmental. In her discussion of “negative” NDEs, elsewhere called frightening or distressing NDEs, she asserts her hypothesis that “a critical element in a negative NDE is the failure or refusal of the individual to turn to or surrender to God” (p. 72). “Failure” and “refusal” are terms with negative connotation that could be interpreted to imply blame. What of an experiencer’s fear of surrender, or lack of familiarity with how to surrender, that might underlie even the seemingly stubborn veneer of vehement atheism? More than one writer in the transpersonal literature has hypothesized that denial of spirituality can arise from a fear of the pain of disillusionment resulting from reliance on a force that, in the end, may really not be there; the best alternative for the seemingly abandoned is to rely on oneself. This dynamic may, indeed, create and perpetuate a “negative” NDE, but to describe and understand the dynamic in terms of fear or unfamiliarity seems, to me, much more empathic—and accurate.

Throughout the book, Kason uses the terms *spiritual*, *spiritual transformation*, and *spiritual transformation process*, but nowhere in the book does she offer a comprehensive definition or description of these terms or phrases. At one point, she asserts that “people who are being spiritually transformed . . . have . . . a far more spiritual focus, . . . much stronger ethical convictions, and . . . become increasingly involved in altruistic and humanitarian endeavors” (p. 25). Elsewhere she describes the hypothesized final goal of human evolution, the achievement of a stable state of consciousness in which one is continuously and simultaneously functioning in the world and experiencing mystical ecstasy. While these and other “sprinklings” throughout the book suggest some of the features of spiritual transformation, I believe the book would have been enhanced by the inclusion of a comprehensive explanation of this and related terms. The explanation would include both subjective/internal and objective/external features of spirituality and spiritual development.

Despite the criticisms cited above, to a very great extent I resonated with the material in this book. I found the kundalini hypothesis intriguing and consonant with my own views. However, a reader need not agree with, or even understand, the kundalini hypothesis

to benefit from the wealth of information offered by this book about transpersonal experience, the characteristics of the spiritual transformation process, and how to proceed along the spiritually transformative path in the healthiest way.

Yet the kundalini hypothesis has a special value. It places NDEs among a variety of experiences manifested from the same spiritual energy source. From this perspective, any experience of this nature provides the experiencer with a subjective basis for understanding the NDE reasonably well. The question of whether a health care provider or researcher can relate to an NDEr then becomes one of experience in the transpersonal domain in general rather than the near-death manifestation of that domain specifically. I appreciate that Kason has validated my experience and perception in this regard and, in a sense, included me and many others among those nonNDErs who do, indeed, relate to the experience of NDErs.

Kason's other great service is as a model of a mentally healthy person on a path of spiritual development. She speculates that thousands of people or more are going through a spiritually transformative process, which, she writes, makes her in no way special. She writes, "I think it helps people to know that a busy, respected, professional person like me can be in the throes of spiritual transformation and be having mystical experiences, psychic episodes, classic Kundalini symptoms [sic] and be experiencing psycho-spiritual housecleaning—and at the same time can lead a well-adjusted, happy, healthy life" (p. 25). I agree with her: It does, indeed, help. And I also disagree with her: That she has used her unique combination of experiences and credentials to help us all in this way makes her very special indeed.

References

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