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LETTER TO THE EDITOR – 11-25-07

In reading the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Summer 2007, I was especially taken with comments by Keith Augustine about embellishments with near-death experiencer accounts. He asked the same questions many of us in research do: are narratives ever exaggerated, changed over time, or colored by the experiencer for any reason.

Bruce Greyson, M.D., in his study entitled "Consistency of Near-Death Experience Accounts Over Two Decades: Are Reports Embellished Over Time?" (2007), found no significant difference with 72 experiencers who recently 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." In other words, there were no significant differences in the accounts as a result of time's passing.

This agrees with what I have noticed in my research of near-death states, for the most part. Still, there are other reaction/responses experiencers exhibit that cause me to be careful in how I regard near-death accounts initially. A rendering of what I have found follows.

No Disclosure Early On. After having had sessions with nearly 4,000 adult and child experiencers, I can state that it is typical for near-death experiencers to withhold an initial reporting of what happened to them. Many are afraid to be so

open, either because they fear being labeled crazy and made to face a psychiatrist, or, because they are unsure of how others might respond, so keeping it secret seems the better way to go. Most, though, are so overwhelmed by what happened that they simply “do not have words” and struggle silently with the issue of belief: can they trust what they experienced, was it really really real, are they kidding themselves, how can it best be described, what to make of it?

Testing Period. A common reaction of experiencers once they decide to “tell someone” is to first test for trustworthiness. And they will do that in dribs and drabs by tossing out a morsel or two, words, phrases, maybe a drawing or a poem, that indicates something uniquely different happened during the time they nearly died or actually flatlined. This “dribbling” can be frustrating to families, friends, and researchers, stretching interview sessions overlong, or causing the other individuals to lose patience, maybe become suspicious about the sincerity of the experiencer. Lengthy testing periods, like for months on end or even for years, can create tension between people. One will tend to “write” the other one off. Most people in the research community understand how to handle the issue of trust, but not all of them. I know this because of comments I received from experiencers, especially those who had distressing, unpleasant, or hellish experiences. What helped me in my work was the fact that I, too, was an experiencer. Seldom did I admit this; really I didn’t have to. Experiencers “just knew.”

The Narrative. Once they start talking (either right away or later on), it is a challenge to stop them. I call it “gushing,” and do they ever. Even while still on the operating table, an experiencer once revived can engage in a non-stop flood of

words describing what they saw on "the other side," what they heard, what they felt, what was revealed to them. This can cause problems with the medical staff and any family members who might be waiting for word of outcome. That initial "gush" is usually spontaneous, spirited, sometimes loud and animated, with "splashes" of colorful descriptions and great emotion. If more time has passed, narratives tend to be more thorough, specific, detailed, deeper. The experiencer, by then, may have already begun the process of searching for meaning, along with trying to interpret the scenario. Gaps and additions that appear as if a narrative alteration or embellishment, can and do occur between early and later tellings. Rarely is this a lie or an exaggeration. Rather, what I recognize as happening here is that experiencers are giving *themselves* permission to tell their story, all of it. That takes courage. To tell someone everything that occurred exposes the individual in ways that may be uncomfortable and a violation of privacy. There are two big issues at this juncture: 1) trusting one's own self-belief, and 2) weighing and balancing elements in a narration that are frankly no one's business or are too bizarre for words. I have observed that once the various trust and privacy issues are settled (even if only within "self" and never admitted to anyone else), the end result - the individual's near-death story - will remain intact over time and not be changed to any significant or noticeable degree (which is what Dr. Greyson verified in his study.)

Media Matters. The greatest tempter for embellishments is the prospect of writing a best selling book and/or becoming a stage presence - whether in churches or in front of television cameras. And I have seen this happen again and again.

Part of the problem is the media's demand for sensationalism: publishers can't sell near-death books unless the newest one tops the others; television shows must jerk/shock/grab every five minutes or viewers get bored; audiences hunger for emotional release, thus have little patience for someone who simply "tells it like it is." The media provides an incredibly amazing source of vital information, news, education, and entertainment, but it also grinds out copy and swallows truth-telling in an orgy of commercial "demandments" that can defy reason. Near-death experiencers can get lost in this terrain and wind up saying or doing things that are not intended. This type of environment influences regular society as well. I could never duplicate today the research I conducted during the early years of my career. Why? Copyrights. Too many people are protective of them today, to the point of withholding necessary information for research – even though research studies *do not violate the copyright of any experiencer's story.*

So what constitutes an embellishment and how do we recognize them?

To answer that question fairly we need to admit "downloading" occurs.

Oftentimes during the experience, but especially afterwards, it is commonplace for a near-death experiencer to suddenly be "seized" with additional information, guidance, revelations, messages, knowings, wisdoms, feelings, vivid images and thoughts not their own. This "extra" material can expand as years pass. Typical responses from people who experienced "downloading:" "I felt as if I would burst if it didn't stop." "There's so much to know that it comes in segments, pieces, so I can handle it." "The revelations are unending, they just keep coming." "I feel as if I'm being fed from above, stuffed full of knowledge and insight."

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I have yet to find that this additional downloading of extra material changes the original scenario. The near-death experience that occurred remains the near-death experience that was reported. Once the individual accepts what happened and arrives at some sense of meaning as per the various issues and implications involved for him/her personally, the narration tends to take on a structure that holds life long. This does not preclude the downloading process, nor remembering more later – especially if the individual is a child experiencer.

The Conundrum of the Child Experiencer. In my research with children who had experienced a near-death state, 61% regretted that it ever happened to them, once they were older. They explained that the incident complicated their life in ways that made growing up a challenge. The majority spoke of being put down or ridiculed by parents, siblings, and friends when they tried to share their story, to the point that they “set it aside” or “tucked it away.” Because of this, many didn’t really deal with their experience or try to integrate it to any extent until they were in their twenties or thirties, some even later. Memory, then, tended to surface in tiers: what could be useful in childhood, what applied to relationships as they grew, what made a difference as an adult, and what spoke to their heart of hearts in quiet moments of reflection and longing. About a third of the child experiencers in my research were clear about what they experienced and appeared wiser than their years, more mature, right-off. The other two-thirds delved into the depths of their memories in steps, especially if their episode happened during birth trauma. Once what was tucked away “burst forth,” they appeared to me as if awakened to a truth they always knew but had somehow forgotten.

This delay in remembering, whether it came in steps or in a sudden “burst,” can seem like an embellishment to someone not familiar with the near-death phenomenon and what is typical of experiencers. This fact concerns me, since jumping to conclusions or doing incomplete research is a regular practice amongst professionals trying to compete for research dollars or with satisfying protocols. (Example: a 2007 paper published in *New England Journal of Medicine* about electrical stimulation of the brain that induced the appearance of a person outside his or her body and naming it a suspected out-of-body experience, when all the scientist did was induce auto-scopy or the doppelganger effect – projecting one’s image beyond one’s body - which is a feature of shamanistic training worldwide and has been for thousands of years. OBEs and auto-scopy are not the same thing.)

So, we’re back to the original question. What I have observed in my work is that the original story *once told as believed by the experiencer* holds overtime. . . alongwith an array of additions and insights that reflect the integration process. These “extras,” for the vast majority, are neither exaggeration nor imaginative invention (embellishments). They are simply an attempt at clarification, as much for the experiencer’s benefit as for the others they inform.

To illustrate this point, I’ll use myself as an example. I had three death/near-death episodes in three months in 1977: January 2 (miscarriage, extreme hemorrhaging), January 4 (major thrombosis in right thigh vein which dislodged followed by worst case of phelbitis the specialist had ever heard of let alone seen), and March 29 (cause still unknown). That Fall I had three relapses (September/October), one of which was adrenal failure. My first near-death experience was

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relatively brief (about five minutes); the second and third were lengthy (estimate – 20 minutes each) with complex scenarios. Each scenario was different, yet progressive in content in the sense that one seemed somehow to lead into the next.

- Initially I told no one. After many misadventures with allopathic care, I turned to a naturopath certified in many other healing modalities as well. He was an old friend, although I had never gone to him as a patient before. I trusted him enough to share a brief description of my three episodes. It seemed to me that if he knew about them it would help him do a better job.
- His interest gave me the courage to tell my friends. They were concerned about me anyway and wanted to help in the healing process. Healers seemed to “pop” right out of the “woodwork,” so many responded to my need. An evening gathering was arranged. The crowd that came surprised me – I knew only a few. After they had performed their specialties, I shared my story, all three experiences in-depth. The response was a deafening silence. Few if any comments were made. People quickly left after that, leaving me feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed.
- In the months that passed, I told more and more people, reaching out to others as if I somehow needed to do that. This compulsion led to numerous gatherings, meetings, opportunities to share. I gained strength from each encounter, my audiences, more open and receptive.
- Dear friends Sun Bear (a Chippewa Medicine Man) and Wabun (his Medicine Helper) invited me to write about my story in their magazine, *Many Smokes*. It was serialized, later to become my very first book, *I Died Three Times in*

1977 (self-published). This opened many doors for me, eventually leading

to three people who not only believed my story but became enormously

helpful in plumbing the deeper realms of the psyche for meaning and value.

I cannot begin to emphasize how important it is for an experiencer to be

believed, and then have an opportunity to further explore that belief.

- Before I left Idaho (my home state) to move East, I had a session with a psychiatrist and two psychologists. None knew anything about the near-death phenomenon, nor did I. I just wanted to know their opinion of what I had gone through. The psychiatrist was more interested in my healing as a whole person, the gestalt of my life. One of the psychologists put me through a series of sessions to make certain I wasn't kidding myself or hiding behind a mask of any sort. The other was extremely confrontive, attacking everything I said, shredding to pieces my every attempt at clarity and truth about my three experiences. After an hour of this pounding, he admitted to testing me. "You've lived most of your life in Idaho," he said. "The rest of the world isn't like this place."
- Soon after, I journeyed to Chicago to spend some time with an Aunt and Uncle I adored. I met Elisabeth Kubler-Ross while at O'Hare Airport. She was alone, waiting on a flight to Europe which had been delayed an hour. I introduced myself, and the two of us huddled on a bench like a couple of school girls, me sharing my three episodes, and she listening intently the

whole time. When I finished, she told me about the near-death experience and said I was a near-death survivor. I had never heard of the term before.

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She validated me, yet my session with her caused more questions than gave answers. She never mentioned Raymond Moody nor his book.

- My move to Washington, D.C. was like leaving the planet. The confrontive psychologist was right. After I found living quarters and a job, I was inspired to begin talking about my episodes to anyone who would listen. I have no idea how many groups I spoke to or how many miles I traveled in doing this. There were that many. I always shared the same story as I had experienced it. Never once, though, did I tell the whole story. My reasons for holding back were varied. Primarily, I had three very different experiences and this takes time to recount, more than I was ever allotted. Also, parts of my story seemed excessively egocentric to me – I could not bring myself to speak of these except in passing. The before and after parts were difficult too, my pregnancy and how I managed to handle the aftereffects, which in my case were as bizarre as they were both frightening and wonder-filled. Some audiences were receptive and some were not.
- During my travels I was swamped by other near-death experiencers anxious to speak with me. Immediately I began sessions with them, functioning as an objective, near-death researcher, and holding to a strict protocol of police investigative techniques. Although this became a single focus for me, my audiences responded differently. Much to my horror, they came to regard me as if I were a saint, almost worshipful, claiming that I was one of the

“chosen” and, oh, how they wished to be like me. I quit sharing my story after that, and concentrated solely on the larger story of what I was finding

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in my research. Switching the subject from personal to public enabled me to keep my focus and truly inform instead of entertain.

- Writing *Coming Back to Life* necessitated that I revisit what had happened to me. I decided to bare all. My editor promptly cut it out. “Be brief,” she said. How can you squeeze into a capsule the size of what to me was an “earth-shattering” event? The result: Chapter Two became “One Woman’s Experiences,” no where near the full story but enough, apparently, to infuriate a lot of people – not the public nor religious folk, per se – but fellow researchers and members of “the near-death community.” “She’s a liar. She’s mentally ill. I don’t know what happened to her but I guarantee it was not a near-death experience. This woman is a basket case.” I was condemned more for my three experiences than for the research I had done. I have no words to describe how deeply this pained me. The ruckus that followed influenced me to turn my story into segments for use in research.
- I took a chance with *Future Memory* of giving specifics about my third near-death experience, and included drawings I had made shortly afterward plus revelations of the innerworkings of creation itself that I had witnessed (only I labeled this a “vision” in the book, as to admit that I actually witnessed the whole thing seemed conceited to me). I did change some of the wording in what I shared to match terms I had used previously (e.g., colloidal condition to explain near-death aftereffects). *We Live Forever* has only enough of my story in it to satisfy the theme of the book and make it more personal.

- It took nearly 25 years for me to admit how I got pregnant and why I do

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research. I was newly divorced in 1976. My life had evolved around my job, my spiritual quest for truth, and my children. Anything else did not exist; dating after a 20-year marriage felt obscene. A man came into my life who fascinated me. After wrecking his rental car late one night, he came to me for solace and for a place to recover. I showed him to an empty guest room and left him there. When I went to sleep, he raped me. Pregnancy resulted. I later forgave the man but it took several decades before I could forgive myself - for never screaming, never fighting back. The scar healed when I finally acknowledged my anger and screamed. I am a researcher because I was told to be one. "The Voice Like None Other" that spoke during my third near-death experience detailed my mission, the reason why I would return to life, and that mission was the research I do. These two things - the rape and my mission - were held secretly in my heart of hearts for a long time.

Am I guilty of embellishing my three near-death experiences over the years? Does holding back, then revealing segments when appropriate, constitute exaggeration or fantasy? Is it creative license when one finally finds the right words to describe, detail, and clarify an event that profoundly changed your life?

People like Keith Augustine want near-death experiences to happen in pristine settings, climate controlled, and technologically wired for cameras and recordings. Anything less to him is a breach of scientific etiquette and a denial of the exactness he seeks. Should experiencers prove to be too complicated, he

tosses them off as fabricators. Should the episode they describe not fit his constellation of anatomy, procedure, and psyche, he brands the stories mere brain Letter to the Editor, 11-25-07, Page 12

chemistry. Certainly there are those who lie about their experience, or make the whole thing up, or embellish it to make themselves look more important. But there are not that many of them, irrespective of his suspicions.

The research community of near-death studies has changed considerably since the early days when I first became involved. We've grown up together. Still, reminders are appropriate: emotions dominate near-death experiences and the people who have them. If we cannot respect that and make room in our work for how messy emotions can sometimes be and how challenging it is to tell one's story, then we have no right to call ourselves purveyors of information about that edge of death that opens to the greatest of all mysteries, nor can we claim to be scientists curious about the world around, within, and beyond us.

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