

GUEST EDITORIAL

NDE as a Threshold Experience

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ABSTRACT: My investigation has shown me that near-death experiences (NDEs) are not some kind of anomaly but, rather, are part of the larger genre of transformations of consciousness. The clue I believe most researchers have missed is stress—specifically, the intensity that comes from that stress (known in shamanism as “high stress”). I believe the entire pattern of aftereffects and the degree to which people change can be traced to that factor. It’s the intensity that shifts experiencers into what I call a “threshold experience”—one that straddles the boundary between this world and other worlds, between brain and that which lies beyond what the brain can access, between reality and miracles, mind and spirit, life and death, heaven and hell, sanity and insanity. Once we humans understand this shift, we can begin to unravel how the transformational process works. At the threshold of who we think we are and what lies beyond body and brain is the core of ancient mysteries. We are transformed by the Oneness we find there.

KEY WORDS: near-death experiences, intensity, threshold experiences, colloidal state, fluid dynamics

My investigation of near-death states (Atwater, 2011) spans 33 years and covers nearly 4,000 adult and child experiencers. Not counted in this body of information are the many sessions I held with significant others. Before my own near-death experiences (NDEs) in 1977, I was equally involved for over a decade studying and experimenting with altered and mystical states, psychic phenomena, and the transformational process, involving over 3,000 people. For some reason unknown to me, my research projects were never small. I have always preferred looking at things from multiple angles and differing views. Police investigative techniques have been my protocol throughout.

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Because this method relies heavily on observation, comparison, and analysis, it is never constrained by words used, language, or culture. Numerous sources of verification are used, and this process can include questionnaires for double-checking previous findings.

This work has enabled me to recognize that NDEs are not some kind of anomaly but, rather, are part of the larger genre of transformations of consciousness. Researchers have singled them out as “different” because near-death states occur mostly at accident scenes, in hospitals, or in environments where, thanks to trained emergency personnel, devices are available to record vital signs. Contrary to the notions of how these episodes form, the scenarios they cover, and the pattern of physiological and psychological aftereffects that usually increase over-time is my finding that *near-death-like experiences* (where death is not imminent) *and inactual spiritual transformations* (regardless of how caused) *manifest the same patterning*. What links these types of in-depth transformational experiences is stress—more importantly the intensity of that stress.

Before such an episode occurs there are stressors, conditions in the experiencer’s life, that point to either unrest or inattention; I have found such stressors to be present universally. What caught my eye with near-death and near-death-like states were episodes that occurred under these conditions:

- during major life junctures;
- when a decision needed to be made, and at times of deep dissatisfaction, disappointment, frustration;
- when feeling hurried all the time or excessively strained;
- while “running a tight ship,” insisting on personal control;
- as lifestyle maintenance toppled one’s ability to keep it going;
- alongside pushing limits—at work, at play, in everything;
- when demanding and strict rules limited one’s beliefs and activities;
- without existence of meaningful goals, or when in strong denial;
- during “happy” times that were really a façade;
- when overly satisfied or complacent—with stress in this case usually unrecognized consciously yet built up internally until a “breakthrough”

occurred.

The common thread present in each situation is stress—even with babes and the unborn. Both a mother's and a father's stress can readily become the child's stress; sometimes it's as if children have their experience for parents or doctors or significant others—to relieve (or heighten/increase) those others' stress. And the type of stress I observed was the kind that pushes a person beyond one's limits, beyond that which is "safe": *a threshold experience*.

On February 29, 2000, the *Daily Progress Newspaper* in Charlottesville, Virginia, reported that Bruce Greyson, MD, professor of psychiatry and near-death researcher at the University of Virginia, was able to show a link between the phenomenon of NDEs and a natural physical response to trauma. He found that experiencers have more dissociative episodes—the normal kind, not the pathological kind—than people who were close to dying but did not have an NDE. Greyson was quoted as saying: "It's basically narrowing your focus so much that you block out things that are going on around you." What he was describing is what shamans and spiritual and mystical folk have for eons of time referred to as the goal of "high stress"—what it takes to push one past the threshold or boundary of what is known.

Through the ages sacred initiations of the greatest order demanded a "death"—seldom physical. They required the death of the ego. One had to "die unto the self," leaving behind previous desires and wants, to take on the trusted role of healer-guide who then dedicated the rest of one's life in service to others. The core of shamanic vision quests ("calling for a vision," or asking the spirits for guidance) still today consists of ceremonial rituals that mimic or come close to actual physical death. Probationers are prepared for this process; still, there is no real preparation for that overwhelming, "over the top" fear that pushes one's panic button. Once that threshold is breached, the individual either passes into madness or breaks through the passageway into otherworlds of spirit that engender a transformation of consciousness.

Consider the mythological traditions of the "hero's journey" or the making of "wise ones." High stress was always the deciding factor: How the individual faced "the watcher at the gate" (fear at the stress threshold), overcame that fear (passed through/ascended), entered into the otherworlds of spirit (that null space where everything is said to converge/suspend/expand into the collective whole), and was imprinted from the aftereffects (bears the "mark")

of ascension). *This “journey” is what establishes the extent to which the individual changes or is transformed.*

The formula then for a transformation of consciousness (the basic energetics) is: intense period of change, high stress that narrows one’s focus, feeling driven or accelerated beyond states of fear/panic, encountering a threshold or boundary, maybe meeting a greeter of some kind, passing into a null space of energy convergence, becoming infused with knowing, imprinted or altered by null space exposure, and returning as one who has been expanded or enhanced by the experience—as if forever “marked” by the pattern of aftereffects.

I’ve seen this formula enacted thousands of times—experiencers who behave as if they have been punched, jerked, hit, pushed, or somehow spun around. Something physical happened to them, something separate from any mind play or otherworldly visitation or event that put them at death’s door. And that “something” shifted their futures by pushing them into a unique arena of experience. The “something” that set them apart I call a “power punch.” It is a force. It is an energy. It is intense. I believe that this intensity—what narrows a person’s focus in high stress, is the key, the hinge, to understanding near-death and near-death-like experiences and inactual spiritual transformations.

The 21% of people in my near-death research who claimed they did not have aftereffects worth mentioning, or any at all, were those whose episodes seemed so superficial to them that they described them as being like a fleeting dream. By contrast, another 60% percent were openly expressive about how intense their episodes were and how those episodes had altered their lives in dramatic ways. These latter experiencers exhibited most or all of the aftereffects pattern. Many seemed stunned at how much they had changed once they compared “before” with “after” their experiences. The remaining 19% who were so radically affected that it seemed as if they had become a different people or at least altered versions of who they had once been, bore the full brunt of the “power punch”—and showed it. Photos of them before and after their experiences illustrated the depths of what they had been through and how those experiences had changed them. Almost to a person they displayed the full pattern of physiological and psychological aftereffects.

In addition, with the 73% of people in my research who had electrical sensitivity afterwards, I found that it was the intensity of their near-death

episode that seemed clearly to have been the determining factor in causing this condition—not how long or short their episode, or how much light they had been exposed to during their NDEs. No matter how I approached this question—cross-comparing brief and longer near-death states or complicated and simple NDEs—regardless even of NDE imagery or how it was described—I still reached the same conclusion: What mattered most in every respect was the intensity of the episode, *not* the episode itself.

I found that the marker for measuring intensity was the impact and spread of both physiological and psychological aftereffects. The more of these aftereffects a person had, and the depth of change that had been brought about, were sure signs of intensity. It did not matter whether the individual experienced one, two, or three elements—such as the living dark, a friendly voice, or a quick out-and-back out-of-body experience—or whether the experience covered the full range of the classical model of NDEs; what made the difference—always—was the life-changing depth of aftereffects.

Reaching the threshold, or boundary between realities, and then crossing through, compares almost exactly with what science calls a colloidal condition: one in which forces suddenly collapse and then converge. This in-between state creates antiferce, which is antigravity. Particles caught in this unique state between implosion and explosion transmute—and remain forever changed by that transmutation. On a molecular level, these particles show evidence of enlargement and of having taken on different and enhanced characteristics. An example of this phenomenon is what happens when water is stirred.

There are several ways water can be stirred. For the sake of this discussion, imagine rotating water in a large vat that has paddles in the middle, with the water spinning around and around, faster and faster, and then suddenly stopping and reversing the direction. When the spinning stopped, the water collapsed into itself, creating an implosion. But just before a reverse spin could be initiated, whereby the water could explode back out again, conditions mysteriously changed. Both the water and everything contained within it were briefly held in suspension. This point of suspension is a colloidal condition, and the particles caught therein are referred to as colloids.

The same thing can happen to the human brain if suddenly hit, jarred, or severely jiggled, especially during trauma or in an accident or fall. Typically, a colloidal-like suspension of consciousness will follow whereby the

environment appears to expand out as time slows to a standstill. The individual feels somehow caught *in-between* realities, as if having slipped through a crack in time and space and having suddenly become resident of a world neither here nor there. This peculiar feeling of being suspended in between realities affects a person so deeply that it can permanently alter the way the individual regards the world at large and one's place in it.

I find that the colloidal condition best describes the process of passing into and through a threshold experience. Once again, here's how I believe it works:

- forces suddenly collapse, then converge;
- a momentary state of suspension results;
 - everything caught in that suspension expands and enlarges as antigravity is created;
 - inherent or unlimited potential is released;
 - whatever is present is imprinted (becomes permanently altered by what happened);
 - whatever is present then transmutes (takes on different characteristics);
 - as reversal of motion is completed, forces are restored, suspension ends, but the imprinting (transmutation) remains.

The majority of people who go through such a process experience an enlargement and expansion of consciousness, exhibit the sudden surfacing of latent abilities, face a confusing array of psychological and physiological aftereffects, and are never quite the same again.

It is my belief that the reason this process of convergence and transmutation is universal is because all of us humans, now and through the ages, are and have always been imprinted by the same creative impulse that originated us. The mark of our creation is what we display whenever our consciousness is set free to rediscover itself and the source of its being. After a threshold experience, we feel as if we have found "home" because the home we think we've found already exists within us—and always has. We recognize the place because we never left it to begin with.

High stress pushes us to where we must face that legendary boundary that separates worlds readily accessible (what we know), from those either infra or ultra to our sense of perception (what seems as if fantasy, imagination, or mystery). In mythology, fear is the “watcher” at the threshold gate.

Intercessors who can act as guides are loved ones who have previously died, angels, religious figures, visitors from other worlds, special animals, maybe birds. The final arbitrator, though, is always the heart.

Tradition says that it is the heart that decides: whether you make it through the threshold gateway, where you go once you pass, and whether you can return to the life you left. Drawings from ancient Egypt illustrated this final step by showing a set of scales for weighing a person’s heart at death. If the heart was weightless like a feather—indicative of a selfless life, the individual passed into the worlds of spirit; if heavy—indicative of being ego bound, the individual was rejected and had to face punishment or some type of abandonment. How might the heart organ, unique as it is, be the final arbitrator of what happens at the passageway?

Research has shown that 60 to 65% of all heart cells are neural cells (Rees, 2007). This structure enables the heart to function in many ways like the brain. However, the heart, being the major glandular structure in the body, produces an electromagnetic field 5,000 times more powerful than that of the brain. Shaped like a torus doughnut, the heart field busily converts one form of energy into another as it generates an infinite number of harmonic waves. These harmonics run throughout all bodily systems and are so sensitive that *they react to conditions four to five minutes before actual occurrence* (Rees, 2007). This futuristic awareness tells the heart if what’s coming is positive or negative so it can prepare. First the heart feels the coming event, then the brain is aware of it, then the eyes see it. The heart, literally, is people’s first responder.

Harmonic heart-waves come into coherence when one feels good, is in love, experiences happiness, has bonded with someone in a positive way, or is in a supportive relationship such as friendship or caregiving (Rees, 2007). When the heart’s energy coheres, it taps into higher energy fields to empower itself while emoting feelings of love and connectedness. This feeling sense operates like a thinking mind and with an unbelievable memory. Heart harmonics entwine worldwide. Spiritual traditions claim this is so because the heart is

the center of the soul. As told in ancient Egypt and from wise ones who recognize the power of the heart, a soul set free by these harmonics becomes dedicated to service.

I have observed that love, or lack of it, dominates near-death, neardeath-like, and spiritually transforming experiences. The fullness of love, being loved, and discovering the power of love appears to determine the overall effect that transformational states have on experiencers, their significant others, and anyone who hears their stories. I consider it is no exaggeration to say that the majority of threshold experiencers return “in love with love.” Being bathed in love beyond measure pales anything less. A challenge that experiencers have afterwards is to “step down” this power a few degrees so as not to overwhelm other people.

The heart’s code is love: love of Source, love of others, love of self. To talk about threshold experiences is to talk about the heart’s ability to expand, embrace, and include the fullness of waveform harmonics. Where does this take us? Always to the same place: Oneness.

All transformative experiences throughout what humans can know of time reflect this perspective what is now termed “the perennial philosophy” (Schmitt, 1966). Going back to Plato and beyond, all great thinkers have spoken of this perspective. All native peoples draw pictures depicting this perspective or speak of it in their songs and stories. All of those who successfully passed the “tests” of the hero’s journey—who made it through the boundary and returned infused with a new wisdom and a new knowledge—described what they discovered as Oneness:

One God.
One people.
One family.
One existence.
One law: love.
One commandment: service.
One solution to problems: forgiveness.

This, the perennial philosophy, is what many people believe to be the only true religion. I believe that all religious thought, irrespective of denomination, creed, or messiah figure, takes its root from this type of experience. If threshold energy is intense enough and affects experiencers deeply enough, individuals return as if “God instructed.” This outcome is why

so many near-death researchers believe that religion itself sprang from individual narratives of NDEs.

In whatever manner this matter is debated, there is a wonderful corollary that comes from China (Hongkai, 2000). Historically, there is a lineage in China of Tibetan Storytellers, usually illiterate peasants, who are known as “Gesar Artists.” These storytellers recount numerous lines of extraordinary sophistication—tales of their most venerated hero, Gesar, a Knight from the Kingdom of Heaven, sent to earth to save and protect Tibetans. Gesar’s story has been passed from generation to generation, *but not by memorizing it!* To be a true Gesar Artist—not just a story-teller—one must experience something akin to a near-death state or what shamans call “dying unto the self”—an ego death—in order to achieve *the personal experience* of what Gesar came to earth to teach. They must become seemingly “God instructed.”

I feel certain that the early teachers of humankind came from the otherworlds beyond the passageway. Shamanic beings, visionary images, spirit manifestations, near-death and near-death-like experiences, the dead come to life—what some label as paranormal occurrences—are actually more akin to spiritual awakenings than to what is often tossed off as paranormal or psychic phenomena.

We humans have endowments to assure life’s continuance: procreation/birth. We also have endowments to assure life’s evolution: renewal/rebirth. I am convinced this latter phenomenon is not imagination. The spiritual, what enables renewal and rebirth, is real.

After a total of 43 years researching, experimenting, and studying a gamut of historical and first-hand spiritually-transforming states, I feel certain of a biological imperative not only for life to exist and to continuously evolve in form, capacity, and intellect but also to reach an even higher order—as if following a “Master Plan.” What happens as a result of transformational states feeds that plan because of how an individual’s experience and the consequences of that experience can be passed from parent to child, generation to generation, biologically. Many people have suspected this process, but thanks to DNA research currently being conducted, the markers of how this process happens have been found. Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829) was a French naturalist who argued that traits acquired in life by parents could be passed on to their offspring (in opposition to Darwin and his theory of natural selection). His work was shunned in his time. Scientists

have now rediscovered his work, naming what they have verified “Lamarckism” (Morgan & Whitelaw, 2008).

As I look at historical patterns, I find that each sudden evolutionary lift and/or period of discovery, as well as each renaissance, was preceded by stories of people who described threshold-type experiences, such that it appeared as if the masses were “waking up.” These physical and spiritual energetics led to bursts of new ideas, creativity, invention, and healing. Each breakout period seeded generations to follow, as if a biological imperative existed to ensure that the human species could reach a greater potential. We know now that if the numbers of those who change are high enough, evolutionary adaptation—even of this magnitude—can happen in a single generation.

The science that I find puts this phenomenon into perspective is the study of fluid dynamics (Rogers, 1998). Fluid dynamics shows how birds in flight maintain organized formations even when individual birds make mistakes, how rotating colonies of bacteria stay together regardless of challenge, how a herd of buffalo maintains order even in full gallop, and how crowds of people pour out from an event as if “directed.” Whenever an energetic wave pattern forms, a natural rhythm of movement emerges. *Whatever is present when this phenomenon happens functions as if “one mind.”*

According to fluid dynamics, it only takes change in only 4–5% of any group, condition, or situation for the whole assembly to follow. Once that tipping point of 4–5% is reached, energy excites and becomes highly charged. This development creates what is called “superfluidity”: *a state of energy that cannot be contained.*

Currently the conservative estimate worldwide for people having had an NDE is 4–5% of the general population (Williams, 2007). This estimate does not take into consideration near-death-like and spiritually transforming experiences that are also intensely life-changing. I believe that counting them, too, could easily double or triple that figure, indicating to me that a realignment of global consciousness toward a higher order is well on its way to becoming highly charged. Freedom tops that higher order, along with enhanced communications, human rights, improved health benefits, equality in education, participatory governance, cooperative incentives for advancement, and creativity and the arts.

A leaderless expansion of conscious awareness, now exploding throughout the Middle East and Northern Africa, mirrors what threshold experiencers come

to know. An awakening is indeed occurring: The cry for freedom and human rights has spread so rapidly it rings with but a single voice. I believe the tipping point for change most certainly has been breached. Humanity is witness to a spontaneous, worldwide, revolution in consciousness—championed by, but hardly limited to, the young exploiting the marvels of Facebook and Twitter.

I believe the idea that near-death aftereffects constitute “a benevolent virus” (O’Brien, 2010) is true. Regardless of whether one thinks in terms of a “Christ Consciousness” that can be achieved by anyone willing to follow the teachings of Jesus, or in terms of the act of becoming “god instructed” by practicing the disciplines of Gesar Artists, today’s revolution bears all the markings of a “soulquake.” Forget any linkage to the so-called “New Age” beliefs of the 1960s. This movement is more “New Thought” (Dresser, 1919), the validation of a higher order of existence, of reality.

I see the goal of every spiritual and religious tradition being to “release the soul from exile,” to teach that no one is ever separated from one’s divine essence. It is the transformational process, however, that actually reconnects soul with Source. Near-death states model this, the reawakening I believe all humans can attain.

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