

A Near Death Experience

“Once you learn how to die, you may then be able to fully live”
(August L. Reader, 1994, p. 12).

The room became expansive as the doctor yelled, “Don’t fall asleep, just keep breathing, and stay awake!” The pain was unbearable, and my body felt like it was submerged in a pool of ice water due to the lack of blood circulating through my body. I heard the nurse yell to a doctor across the room, “I can’t get a pulse; the veins in his upper body are collapsing!” I could not stay awake much longer. The idea of falling asleep was very appealing, and there was a strange beauty to the idea. I knew I was dying and accepted it as my destiny. It did not feel like dying at all; it felt more like a transitory process into another life. I knew that my physical body would cease to exist, but the inward journey I was about to take would propel me back to the stars. I finally gave in and drifted out of consciousness to embark on a journey “home,” but instead I woke up in the intensive care unit of St. Luke’s Hospital in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

That was the night of New Year’s Eve, 2003/2004, and when I woke I saw my family standing around me. I could feel the intravenous needles penetrating the veins in my arms and another tube that had been placed inside my nose. My father told me that I had ruptured my spleen from a snowboarding accident. The doctor told me I was about five to ten minutes from being pronounced “dead on arrival.” I did not just rupture my spleen; according to the doctor, it “blew up” and was the “worst spleen” he had ever seen. No wonder I had heard a loud “pop” sound when I hit the ground. I lost about five to six pints of blood internally, and had to have my spleen removed and a massive blood

transfusion. I am thankful to this day that the doctors acted quickly to save my life, and I am blessed with a second life to live. Sixteen would have been too young to die.

The psychological and psychospiritual effects that the near-death experience (NDE) had on me changed my life forever. I woke up feeling like a different person with a new perception about the meaning of life. The change in consciousness and the way my psyche began processing reality seems almost impossible to describe or validate through the mechanistic viewpoint of Western medicine, psychiatry, and psychology. This experience left me feeling isolated from the world for a period of time as I struggled to find answers to help integrate my experience back into everyday life. With very little explanation that resonated with my experience, I felt hopeless in finding an answer to what had happened to me while I was dying. It was not until I learned about the paradigm of transpersonal psychology that I would start to formulate a new language for understanding my experience as well as similar “non-ordinary” experiences.

The NDE can be viewed as an extraordinary experience that produces profound changes within an individual. August Reader, an ophthalmologist who suffered his own near-death experience describes in the article, “The Internal Mystery Plays: The Role and Physiology of the Visual System in Contemplative Practices” (1994). Reader states that people who suffer a NDE or a similar experience of extraordinary significance undergo changes in the psyche and a transformation that affects their lifestyles, their relationships to themselves and others, and the world at large (Reader, 1994). Interestingly enough, the foundation of many mystical, religious, and spiritual traditions and experiences can be traced back to recorded cases of near-death experiences throughout human history cross-culturally (Reader, 1994).

My NDE was the most mystical event of my life. It still lingers in the back of my mind with the many unanswered questions about the reality of life, the human psyche, and consciousness. How does one move forward and integrate powerful life-changing experiences when the culture provides no explanation for such events? Western culture has historically viewed these experiences as pathological or merely chemical reactions of human physiology, with the insufficient conclusion that “it’s all in your head.” Many Eastern and shamanic cultures, however, view these powerful experiences as honorable, valuable, and authentic. Stanislav Grof’s work has helped to bring the two viewpoints into closer alignment. My research has helped to reconcile my questions about the impact of my NDE.

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