Guest Editorial

The Near-Death Experience: Private or Public?

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ABSTRACT: This editorial contrasts the private, personal near-death experience with the public concept of the experience, and finds important messages for humanity that are common to both.

It would be difficult to think of an experience that is more private, secret, and personal than that brief, dramatic opening of nonphysical eyes to another realm of consciousness. Yet the near-death experience (NDE) is unquestionably of worldwide interest, affecting the human understanding of our existence, and changing fundamental beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life.

The existence of organizations to study and to make use of the near-death experience raises the very pertinent question of how the private experience and the public perception of the NDE overlap. If we begin with the NDEs of individual humans, we are dealing with a phenomenon that is ineffable, as well as intimately personal in its effect on a particular individual at a particular moment in time. It is true that the popularization of the NDE resulting from Raymond Moody’s bestseller and the subsequent books, articles, studies, television and radio shows, and public programs actually is based on these very short moments

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that cannot be described, evaluated, or understood by anyone else. The accumulation of NDE accounts from countless individuals, however, has created a model of the near-death experience for humanity as a whole, with each experiencer having a few or perhaps many of the distinct elements including the out-of-body experience, the tunnel, the being of light, the beautiful realm, meeting departed loved ones, the life review, the "barrier," and the choice to return to unfinished obligations.

That is a sort of public NDE that belongs to all people, whether or not they have personally undergone the experience, and the two dominant results for the experiencer—the belief in a higher realm of consciousness and the loss of fear of death—are already being transmitted to a great many people who have not personally come to that verge of bodily death. But there are other consequences of the NDE for both the individual and the general public. Since it is likely that most of these have not yet been seriously studied, yet they are probably more important than the experience itself, it would be useful to consider the effects of the NDE on the experiencers and on their family and friends, and then try to evaluate the meaning of the NDE as a powerful and beneficial awakening to a new way of thinking for our times.

In a somewhat remote way we might compare the "discovery" of the NDE to the dawning of the realization that our world is a round globe, that the tiniest bits of matter are composed of countless molecules and atoms, that all around us are unseen, unfelt, and incredibly useful fields of energy only discovered within our century. Each of these, as well as other concepts now widely accepted, marked the beginning of a new understanding of our universe and ourselves.

Before I proceed, it is useful to note that the private versus public NDE question can be applied to the organizations devoted to exploring this fascinating subject. The private side of the NDE may include an experiencer's relationships with a very small number of persons, a spouse, good friend, or relative. It might include a trusted clergyman who seeks to reconcile the experience with the person's religious beliefs, and possibly a psychologist or doctor who can deal with the NDE from a professional background. It would include the sometimes difficult adjustments of the experiencer and his or her family.

The private aspects of the NDE may be encountered in a small "Friends of IANDS" chapter that meets regularly to allow experiencers to talk about their NDEs with other experiencers or others interested in the experience, or a support group to reassure and strengthen the experiencers or their spouses who are unable to deal with this amazing happening. Such relationships may not include much more than comparing the experiences, noting differences and similarities, or probing