Death, Dying, and Mysticism
Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Study of Mysticism

The exploration and interpretation of mystical phenomena is an integral part of the study of religion and spiritual practice, which consistently attracts the interest of scholars and the general public. At the same time, the term “mysticism” may encompass all kinds of transformative practices leading to an experience of ultimate reality or the divine outside the context of particular religious traditions. As a result of the increasingly interdisciplinary character of the study of humanities, scholars are becoming more interested in the contributions of different academic disciplines to the understanding of mystical phenomena. In the spirit of this growing conversation across disciplinary boundaries, the series provides a space for the interdisciplinary study of mysticism, where new methodologies informed by psychology, the natural sciences, or the humanities complement more traditional approaches from religious studies and theology. The series also privileges interreligious and comparative approaches to the study of mysticism, with a particular interest in Asian religions and minority religious traditions.

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In the Series

Death, Dying, and Mysticism: The Ecstasy of the End
Edited by Thomas Cattoi and Christopher M. Moreman
Death, Dying, and Mysticism

The Ecstasy of the End

Edited by
Thomas Cattoi and Christopher M. Moreman
To Deena and Justyna
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Acknowledgments

This volume brings together the work of a variety of scholars, many of whom have contributed to the annual sessions of the Mysticism and the Death and Dying Groups of the American Academy of Religion. The editors would like to extent their word of thanks to all the contributors as well as to the members of the groups, without whom this volume would not have been possible.

The editors would also like to thank Burke Gerstenschlager for all his work to make this volume possible.
The present collection of essays will explore the ways in which different religious and spiritual traditions—as well as individuals who do not explicitly identify with any tradition—have approached the dying process as a moment of transformation and opportunity for growth. The approach of this volume is interreligious as well as interdisciplinary, drawing upon the insights of disciplines as varied as psychoanalysis, musicology, and ethnographic studies. The project is the result of the collaboration between the Mysticism and the Death and Dying Groups of the American Academy of Religion: a number of the papers were presented at seminars held at the annual meetings of this organization, while others are the work of scholars who have contributed to the work of these two groups over the years. A number of papers explore the dying process in the writings of authors who broadly drew for inspiration from the Judeo-Christian tradition, either as traditional believers or heterodox practitioners; others set out to chart the experience of death and dying in the context of the Eastern philosophical traditions and their all-encompassing sense of the divine; still others reflect on the experience of dying in the post-religious, secular world, where intimations of life after death in near-death experiences coexist with the joyous despair of Lacanian psychoanalysis and the increased medicalization of the bereavement process. In a world where no religious or ethical norm is any longer viewed as universal, and where traditional answers to questions of ultimate meaning no longer remain uncontested, the inescapable character of death is like a surd rending the all-encompassing web of economics and technology. To echo Yalom, when we consider death, we are blinded, as if we were staring
at the sun. The sun, however, is what keeps us alive; similarly, only confronting the idea of death can save our life from becoming a pit of meaningless banality.

Of course the fear of life’s end, of one’s own dissolution and sliding toward nothingness is not an experience that is alien to spiritual practitioners. Indeed, episodes when the mind and the self are overwhelmed by the thought of physical suffering and the perspective of one’s end punctuate even the lives of great mystics and ascetics. Generations of Christians have read of the agony in the garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus appears overwhelmed by the thought of the passion and appears to ask God for a reprieve:

He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. (Luke, 41–44)

A great Hindu sage of the twentieth century, Sri Ramana Maharishi, would also recount an episode when he was suddenly overwhelmed by a fear of death:

Suddenly, while alone in his room, a terrible fear and realization of death overcame him. The young Venkataraman, in perfect health, and without any outward suffering, felt that his last hour had come. His reaction was entirely different from what one would expect. He called for no help. Nor did he seek a doctor, but quietly laid down on the floor, saying to himself: “Death is coming to me, but death of what. My body is already lying without movement, it is becoming cold and stiff, but ‘I,’ my consciousness, is not affected at all. ‘I’ am therefore independent of this dying form. ‘I’ am not this body.” After some time life came back to the corpse-like body, but its dweller had changed. His experience brought to him the conviction of the independence of his real Self from the temporary form falsely called “I.”

Eventually, Jesus and Maharishi manage to overcome this fear of death through prayer—in the Gospel narrative—or through speculative reasoning, in the words of Maharishi. Contemporary Western man is obsessed with physical survival: addressing his dying father, the poet Dylan Thomas exhorts him not to accept his end in a passive manner, but to struggle, and to fight, against the gradual extinction of his faculties. In complete opposition to this approach we find the attitude
of radical acceptance and readiness to leave this world expressed by the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore: when death comes and knocks at the door of our life, he says, we should be able to offer it the full panoply of our earthly lives, never letting him go with empty hands. We have been summoned to a new journey. Having devoted his life to an exploration of the human condition, Tagore does not fear his passing, but welcomes it like a guest for whom one sets aside the choicest treats.

How does one achieve this attitude of inner peace and detachment? Writing on the topic of death in 1903, Leo Tolstoy observes: “I love my garden, I love to read books and I love to caress children. When I die, I shall be deprived of all this, and therefore I do not want to die, and I fear death. Perhaps my whole life consists of such temporary, worldly desires and their satisfaction. If this is the case, I am unable not to fear that death will put an end to all these desires. However, if these desires and their satisfaction have been replaced in me by another desire—to carry out the will of God, to surrender to his will, then the more my desires have been replaced the more not only my fear of death will decrease, but death itself will exist for me less.” Preparation for death consists in an education—indeed, a reshaping—of one’s own desires: moving away from the things of this world, one comes to rest in God in whom there is no shadow of change. In his story “The Death of Ivan Ilyich,” the same Leo Tolstoy meditates on the great propaedeutic value of physical suffering, showing how a prolonged and intense experience of bodily pain—something that also alienates us from the company of the living—gradually detaches one from all attachments, showing us the path toward a serene acceptance of our passing.

The great religious traditions that for millennia have accompanied humanity’s search for meaning and purpose have always ascribed great importance to preparing for death, so as to reach the moment of one’s demise “with the full vessel of one’s life” in the words of Tagore. The holistic vision that was typical of traditional religions envisaged the whole cosmos as a kaleidoscope of signs that could—if correctly interpreted—guide spiritual practitioners to an acceptance of their own mortal conditions. In this perspective, bodily suffering and physical decay could be the springboard for a last, intense period of intellectual and spiritual growth: indeed, dying would become the culmination of one’s own spiritual progress. Alas, this integral Weltanschauung where all aspects of the material world embrace and sustain our spiritual practice has been replaced by the vision of a spatiotemporal universe that is indifferent to the welfare of humanity, and where the
joint forces of economics and the applied sciences view the natural world as a resource for purely material and technological progress. After Immanuel Kant drove a wedge between pure and practical reason—between our cognitive ability to explore the natural world on one hand, and our ethical faculties on the other—the dying process has actually retreated into meaninglessness. The *homo faber* of modernity has become the master of his own destiny, and yet he appears to lose his bearings when it comes to the supreme moment of his passing from this world. If one can no longer experience the earthly joys of this world—this perspective seems to suggest—life is no longer worth living; death becomes nothing else but a failure—and indeed, a failure that unmasksthe partial and limited character of our desire to control our life.

The great comforting metanarrative of the Christian tradition—one that accompanied the history of Western civilization for centuries until the threshold of the modern era, and that envisaged death and the end of human existence as part and parcel of a harmonious progress into the mystery of God—has been replaced by another, no less sweeping metanarrative where the meaning and purpose of death are no longer to be found inscribed in the very texture of the natural world, but are to be painstakingly constructed by each and every individual confronted by the threat of meaninglessness and dissolution. While traditional *ars moriendi* followed the pattern of classical iconography, where a limited number of models was proposed for the imitation of all, its contemporary counterpart allows for, and actually welcomes originality—though this originality is so radical that it may even choose to retrieve early, classical approaches to the end of life if these “suit our needs” and sensitivity. Postmodern men and women eagerly look for models, only to discard them in their search for an ever more elusive “authenticity.”

How did we move from the all-embracing narrative of the early church to the harsh existential fragmentation of the present world? If we look at the writings of Gregory of Nyssa (335–395), we see how familiar he was with the temptation of meaninglessness. At the beginning of his essay *De Anima et Resurrectione*, Gregory recounts how his soul was “sorrow-stricken” after the demise of his brother Basil, who had spent the last ten years of his life ministering to his flock in Caesarea while championing the teachings of the council of Nicaea as well as the belief in the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. Yearning for an “interchange of sympathy” over the loss of his brother, Gregory journeys to visit his sister Macrina, only to find that she is also close to
her death. Gregory tells us in the *Vita Macrinae* that upon his arrival, she artfully subdued her labored breathing and feigned perfect cheerfulness and tranquility of spirit, going as far as suggesting “pleasant topics” for conversation. Gregory’s soul is in the grips of turmoil; Macrina, “like a skilful driver,” gives in momentarily to the grief of her brother; eventually, however, she engages him in conversation, and sets out to calm the “disordered state” of his soul. Macrina quotes the words of the Apostle, for whom we are not to “grieve for those that sleep,” as only “those who are without hope” indulge in these feelings (1 Thess. 4:13). What follows between Gregory and Macrina is an extraordinary speculative tour-de-force, where Macrina and her brother examine a panoply of philosophical positions on the meaning of mortality and the human condition, and find them all wanting when compared with the insights provided by the Christian revelation. For Gregory and Macrina, Christianity is far more than a collection of doctrines rooted in Scripture and faithfully transmitted from generation to generation. Christianity, rather, is a comprehensive philosophy, which offers an exhaustive account of the human condition, of the meaning and purpose of human existence, but also of its position within the cosmos—a cosmos that is illumined by the joint lights of revelation, reason, and human experience.

Gregory and his fellow Cappadocians lived and worked at a time when the growth of the Christian church in the wake of the Edict of Milan made it gradually necessary to draw doctrinal, no less than institutional, boundaries around the deposit of faith. The great Christological and Trinitarian controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries created a theoretical framework that the Christian churches of East and West would inhabit—albeit with constant adjustments and modifications—well into the modern era. This framework emerged from the synthesis of three distinct elements: the teachings of the books that the tradition would come to consider as the inspired Word of God; the conceptual legacy of Neo-Hellenism, which had evolved into the philosophical *koinē* of the times, and whose various currents blended a fundamental Neoplatonic thrust with a variety of Aristotelian correctives; and finally, what Gregory called the “common conceptions” (*koinē hypolēpsis*) of humanity—our shared reason, which alone could explore the mysteries of the created order, as well as the depths of God’s self-disclosure in Scripture. Gregory’s sweeping account of the creation of humanity in *De Hominis Opificio* is a poignant example of this synthesis, which allows Gregory to present the human person as the culmination of God’s creation.
When contemporary readers approach a text by Gregory, a startling characteristic of his argumentation is his extraordinary confidence in reason’s ability to discern and adjudicate between different positions and beliefs—beliefs that do not concern solely the great speculative questions of the creation of the universe, the fall of humanity and its redemption by the incarnation of the Logos. For Gregory, reason is also the lodestar of ethical discernment; it enables us to read the created order as a constellation of signs disclosing God’s providential plan for the cosmos, as well as his intended purpose for humanity. The universe of the Cappadocian Fathers is pregnant with ethical meaning; everything is ordered and subordinate to the eternal Logos that is present in every aspect of the cosmos, and thereby invests the laws of nature with a significance that transcends their role as the ontological backbone of the created order. Continuing in this respect the great ethical vision of Origen’s *De Principiis*, Gregory circumvents the dichotomy between God’s cosmic providence and God’s eagerness to wean us away from the lure of self-centeredness and self-indulgence, and to introduce us gradually to a relationship of love and intimacy with Him. In this perspective, the goal of Christian philosophy is to evidence the intrinsic congruence between divine *pronoia* and divine *paideusis*: every element of the created order is also the bearer of an ethical teaching, which we can discern with the aid of reason as well as the deliverances of Scriptural revelation.12

The Cappadocian Fathers argue that human beings alone possess—or indeed carry in the structure of their very being—the hermeneutic key that can disclose the meaning of the cosmos. Human beings are the crown and culmination of God’s creation; they alone can interpret the mystery of creation, and indeed, the mystery of creation has been planned for them and with them at its summit. Gregory’s brother Basil, for instance, expatiates at great length in his *Hexaemeron* about the propaedeutic meaning of animals’ behavior—indeed, of some of the quirkiest and oddest of them all: elephants lifting their trunks to heaven remind us of our duty to worship God, and the oyster’s resistance to the curiosity of crabs teach us the value of modesty and chastity. While a dazzling vista of allegorical readings rises up from the plain letter of Scripture, animals, plants, and the heavens are there to instruct us, to warn us, and ultimately to remind us of our special role in God’s plan.

Gregory’s and Macrina’s dialogue in *De Anima et Resurrectione* is one more exposition—and one of the most compelling—of this all-encompassing vision: the starting point for the dialogue is not the idiosyncratic behavior of some exotic animal, or the majestic and
harmonious movement of some inapproachable constellation: it is
the experience of death itself, as well as the gradual, progressive, and
inexorable dissolution of our earthly frame, that keeps together our
body and our soul. At the outset of this dialogue, Gregory is pro-
strated by grief at the death of his brother, and as he contemplates the
impending passing of his sister, he considers the tragic character of the
human condition, which showers us with such an abundance of gifts,
only to cruelly snatch them away from us at the end. Macrina seeks
to console her brother, but she goes well beyond a mere address to
the emotions: rather, she seeks to engage Gregory’s intellect, and she
guides him through a long and complex intellectual exploration of the
fundamental unity of body and soul, which are separated for a time
at the moment of death, but will be reunited again—this time for all
eternity—at the moment of the Resurrection. Gregory initially struggles
to follow Macrina’s intellectual peregrinations, as his mind is obfus-
cated by the passions of grief and resentment. Eventually, however, he
is lured by Macrina’s sweeping vision of the irreversible unity of our
body and soul, a reality inscribed in the very purpose of the created
order, and simultaneously hinting at the divine plan for humanity.

Much like Plato’s own dialogues, *De Anima et Resurrectione* is
unlikely to be the record of an actual conversation between Gregory
and his sister at the time of her impending death. Our knowledge of
Macrina is limited to Gregory’s own writings about her, and we do not
know the extent to which the views expressed in this text by Macrina
are really her own, or originate from Gregory. The trope of the propae-
deutic dialogue, however, enables Gregory to present a whole plethora
of philosophical positions on the ultimate significance of death, and
to examine them one by one and to find them all wanting. In resort-
ing to the philosophical tradition of Hellenism, Gregory and Macrina
assess it in light of divine revelation in Scripture, but also following
the cues of human rationality—the “common notions” just mentioned,
which are part of our shared heritage as members of the human fam-
ily. Indeed, the very purpose of the dialogue is to show that there is a
deep congruence between the two, and that one’s intellectual assent
to the teaching of immortality does not rest on the silencing of one’s
intellectual faculty, but is actually an insight whose compelling char-
acter will inevitably emerge, if one’s use of reason is not obfuscated by
prejudice and error. The role of Macrina in this conversation is thus
to purify Gregory’s reason from the defilements left by the passions,
on one hand, and by wrongful teaching, on the other. How can there
be no occasion for grieving, says Gregory, “when we see one who so
lately lived and spoke becoming all of a sudden lifeless and motionless, with the sense of every bodily organ extinct, with no sight or hearing in operation, or any other faculty of apprehension that the sense possesses?” True, revelation affirms personal immortality; but such utterances, Gregory says, seem like arbitrary commands, asking us to believe that the soul lasts forever, but offering no rational argument in support of this claim. Indeed, “our mind” may be able to “accept slavishly” this teaching, but actually struggles to acquiesce to it “with a spontaneous impulse.” Reason appears to rebel at the divine teaching of the survival of the soul, and if this is the case, this teaching can only be embraced with an effort of the will.

Macrina’s response to Gregory rests on an initial refutation of Stoic and Epicurean cosmology. Epicurus made the senses the only means to apprehending anything of value about the universe, and he—so to speak—“closed the eyes of the soul.” As a result, he envisaged the whole of the created order—and the body along with it—as a concourse of different elements that are forever coming together and moving apart. This approach would deny the existence of God no less than the existence of the soul; but this is due to the undue reduction of the scope of our cognitive operations. Humans do begin to explore the outer world by ways of the senses, but the sensory operations lead us “to the understanding of the super-sensual world of fact and thought,” and thereby we learn to discern the divine intelligence that sustains and encompasses the universe within itself. As the human being is a microcosm that mirrors and reflects the dynamics of the cosmos as a whole, the senses will similarly teach us the operations of the body, but the intellect will lead us to an intuition of the immaterial intelligence that sustains them and is their ultimate source. Macrina goes on to describe different bodily functions and different natural phenomena, noting that in both cases the intellect is led to discern the presence of a mind that guides and directs the body and the cosmos to their goal. If this is the case—she asks her brother at the end of her peroration—why should one conceive such a hatred of death? The body may undergo dissolution, but the mind is not subject to the vagaries of space.

Gregory seemingly accepts Macrina’s argument, but he goes on to question whether passions such as anger and desire are actually part of the soul. Macrina notes that they are like warts growing on the soul, and that there is a tendency on our part to try to get rid of them; indeed, some great men “such as Moses” were able to get rid of them. Emotions, however, have been given us to be used with a purpose; indeed, “according to the use which our free will puts them to, these emotions of the
soul become the instruments of virtue or vice.” Reason, like a charioteer, will use the emotions to move forward the chariot of the soul; but if reason drops the reins and is dragged by the emotions like the charioteer who got entangled in his car, our passions will gain the upper hand, and we will be no different from brutes. For Macrina, it is important to remember that if desire is taken from us—and desire can become love—we can no longer be united with God; and if we are no longer capable of anger, we shall no longer be able to resist the devil. As such, even though we come to understand the created order with the intellect, it is with our passions that we engage it, and it is the passions that can lead us to a better grasp of its authentic purpose. In the same way as the husbandman leaves “bastard seeds” in the field, so that the land may make the harvest more abundant, the master left the passions in our soul so that we may come to know and understand him more deeply than we would ever be capable of doing if we only resorted to our intellect. Through desire we are brought nearer to God, drawn up, so to speak, by a chain that brings together the intellect and the emotions.15

Gregory’s beliefs on death reflect the broader Cappadocian commitment to the construction of a comprehensive, integral Christian philosophy—a project that was pursued with equal dedication by his brother Basil. In De Hominis Opificio, Gregory envisages the whole of the universe as a manifestation of God’s propaedeutic plan: God’s salvific intent is not extrinsic to the natural laws of the cosmos—rather the latter are an expression of the divine plan.16 While certain currents of desert spirituality tend to look at human passion and emotions with an attitude of disdain and present the goal of practice as an intellectual flight from their grasp, Gregory’s approach actually encompasses the emotions into a more optimistic anthropology and regards them as an important, if not crucial, cognitive tool. In this perspective, growth in intellectual knowledge necessarily entails growth in emotional self-control; and a greater understanding of the structure and purpose of the natural order will simultaneously afford a greater understanding of the stages and overall purpose of our spiritual trajectory. This unified vision is what enables Macrina to take her brother by the hand and accompany him in this exploration of the parallel structure of the cosmos and humanity, highlighting the inner congruence between the two and the role of the divine and human intellect in sustaining its different parts—an intellect that can then guide desire and anger toward their righteous goal in God. Macrina’s reflection on the ars moriendi is thus informed by a profound confidence in the power and unity of intellect and emotions: a correct understanding of their relationship
will assuage all fear of death, and remind us that our passions are themselves tools that we received from God to draw closer to him. The dying process is thus an opportunity to ponder and reflect one last time on the mystery of the human condition: intellectual awareness of the reality of our nature will soothe all fears of eternal dissolution, whereas redirecting our emotions to God—away from the transitory things of this world—will ease our passage into his presence.

If the dying process for Gregory is an exercise in intellectual and emotional purification, this is because Gregory’s overarching epistemology sees no discrepancy between the human faculties that explore the structure of the cosmos on one hand, and our inner emotional scaffolding—which is closely connected with our moral sense—on the other. For Gregory, the ethical, propaedeutic dimension of the natural order is an unquestioned starting point, much as it was for most Hellenist thinkers of his era. Unlike them, however, Gregory grounds this ethical intent in the mystery of the Christian God, glimpses of which we can catch in the books of Scriptures and the depths of our own spiritual experience. Resting in the intellectual certainty of the purposive nature of reality, which she has acquired after being thoroughly schooled in the tradition of Greek thought and the deliverances of Christian revelation, Macrina faces the dying process as one last test for the intellect and emotions, eagerly awaiting its resolution in God.

Alas, Gregory’s intellectual world—a world where philosophy, revelation, and “the common conceptions of humanity” speak in harmony of a glorious destiny for humanity—is not the world that most of us inhabit—or indeed, the world that most Western thinkers have inhabited ever since Immanuel Kant postulated a distinction between pure and practical reason in the late eighteenth century. Immanuel Kant lived during a historical period characterized by impressive developments in the field of philosophy and the natural sciences—the achievements of Newton, Locke, and Hume immediately come to mind, with which theological reflection seemed unable to hold pace. One of the central problems in Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason is the question of the foundation of metaphysical knowledge—how is it possible for us to know anything at all about the natural world? The empiricist school answered this question by pointing at the mechanical processes undergirding nature, and claimed that we acquired knowledge as we gradually became acquainted with these processes. Kant challenged this approach, which turned intellectual inquiry into a purely passive process, and claimed that our knowledge is actually something that we inhabit, or in other words, we shape from the inside. Classical realism
suggested that we could discern a meaning that was already inscribed into the world, but for Kant meaning was something that we grafted onto the world, whereby we could then make sense of our experiences. In order to get any kind of empirical knowledge of the world, we bring in a set of metaphysical categories that are not derived from empirical science—categories such as space and time, which Kant regards as innate and inherent to the human condition. The implication of this reasoning—an insight whose audacity would have startled the thinkers of previous centuries—is that the world does not operate independently of us; we do not merely learn to read the laws of nature that structure the natural order and determine its evolution over time. Rather, our interpretation of the world is necessarily colored by our assumptions and categories, and emerges out of this synergistic encounter.18

The problem with this approach, however, is that according to Kant, pure reason—that branch of reason that explores the natural world—has nothing to teach us about the problem of the existence of God, or the fundamental questions of morality. Ethics is not inscribed in the structure of the universe, but is the offshoot of our own practical reason. The all-embracing vision of Gregory—which broadly exemplified the normative worldview of the Christian West from its inception until the threshold of modernity—crumbled to pieces under the hammer of the philosopher from Koenigsberg. According to Kant, ideas such as God and morality are outside the purview of scientific investigation; in addition, they are also beyond the scope of synthetic judgments, since the latter rest on spatiotemporal categories, which God clearly transcends.19 What enables us to think morally is our practical reason, which gives us the motivation to act “for the sake of duty alone,” and which also requires us to act in such a way that each and every rational being is treated as an end and not as a means. The *Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals* suggests clearly that human beings will fall short of the deliverances of practical reason, and as such they are almost inevitably bound to fall short of their potential; however, the possession of this practical reason is also what sets us apart from the animal kingdom.20 Kant actually developed a highly philosophical Christology, but his understanding of Christ was very distant from the classical paradigm of the first centuries: the tension between Christ's humanity and divinity merely exemplified the dialectic between inclination and law, which shapes our moral choices. If Gregory viewed Christ as the paradigm of the deified individual, Kant views him as the model of the perfect moral agent. Practical reason requires you to set aside your own “natural inclinations”; heeding one’s passions thwarts
our growth and prevents us from acting “autonomously,” or—in other words—from acting in line with the moral law.

For Gregory, desire and anger were part and parcel of the psychophysical composition of humanity, even as both of them had to be trained so as to be harmonized with the intellect. The individual is essentially an embodied reality, and a reality that will be redeemed inasmuch as he or she is embodied: the individual is a psychophysical unity that death provisionally sunders, but whose bond will be eschatologically restored. For Kant, however, moral autonomy is realized in the employment of practical reason, and one’s own emotions are swept under the carpet of the kingdom of ends. Kant’s Christ is an idealized moral agent, but compared to the incarnate redeemer of Gregory and the Church Fathers, he is little more than an empty cipher, gesturing at a disembodied moral horizon that appears to transcend our ordinary lives. In the kingdom of ends, there is little room for contingency; everything is subjugated by the call of duty—a duty that is ultimately self-referential and that can coax or enjoin, but hardly comfort and encourage. Death is no longer a preparatory exercise, reminding us of the divine intelligence that sustains the cosmos and of the unity of the individual that will be restored; it is a natural event among many, and one whose moral value we are called to shape by way of our individual choices in this world. If Kant had visited the bedside of Macrina, he would have been impressed by her stoicism and moral rectitude, but would have had more than a few reservations as to her readiness—indeed, eagerness—to discern God’s presence in the natural order; nor would he have approved of her belief in the ultimate congruence between natural regularities on one hand, and ethical laws on the other. One may then rush to conclude that Kant’s call to moral autonomy and authenticity anticipates the postmodern sensitivity that prizes individualism and self-realization. However, Kant’s invitation to silence the sirens of feeling and individual inclination reminds us that the path to the kingdom of ends is rocky, and that many will be left disoriented or wounded.

In our world, more than at any other time in history, dying is something that one has to do alone; while in the past one could imitate the lives of the saints and the great mystics of the East, in the same way as iconographers copied the hallowed models of the past, our own *ars moriendi* has become a kind of spiritual collage, a sort of end-of-life graffiti, where elements from different traditions are cut and pasted to suit our own ever-changing sensitivity. This collection of essays wishes to be a palette for the reader.
Notes

15. The passions (*pathē*) are thus considered a *pharmakon*, a medicine that can heal but also poison the soul. Gregory of Nyssa, *De Anima et Resurrectione*, 432–434.
Lady Jacopa and Francis: Mysticism and the Management of Francis of Assisi’s Deathbed Story

Darleen Pryds

“Praise be you, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no one living can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin. Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy Will, for the second death shall do them no harm.”¹ On his deathbed in 1226 Francis of Assisi composed these words and added them as the final verses to his “Canticle of the Creatures,” thereby making known his acceptance of death to his followers and securing a place for this attitude toward death in the Franciscan spiritual tradition. His was not a passive acquiescence to death; instead he welcomed it. Francis saw death as a reason to offer praise to God since it provided yet another indication of God’s will and it initiated the Christian believer into new life. The ease and tenderness toward death expressed in the canticle, however, belies contested efforts to write the definitive account of Francis’s decline and death. As the founder of a rapidly growing order and as a canonized saint by 1228 just two years after his death, Francis was the focus of widespread spiritual attention, admiration, and even imitation. How to account for his life and his death in appropriate ways to edify and inspire the faithful while excising stories of spiritual traits that could be misunderstood and potentially misappropriated by his admirers including fellow friars was of concern to contemporary ecclesial authorities including the leaders of the Franciscan Order.

In the first one hundred years after Francis’ death, there were dozens of *vitae*, personal accounts, sermons, liturgies, and letters written
about him. From these many accounts, there was agreement that Francis endeavored to conform his own life as much as possible to the life of Jesus. By adopting a life of humility, poverty, and itinerant preaching, Francis modeled his life on that of Jesus. This conformity was made complete through the physical suffering he endured in the final years of his life. Francis’s followers and admirers were quick to draw a spiritual significance from his suffering. Already in physical decline by 1224, Francis was rumored to have received the stigmata, the five wounds of Christ imprinted on his body. While he tried to hide these wounds in the last two years of his life, his followers including hagiographers were quick to write about his bleeding wounds, and interpreted them to be a somatic sign of Francis’s mystical union with Christ. The early sources agree that his mystical connection with Christ was not only a spiritual one, but also a physical one. He lived out his life in such a way that he very quickly became known by contemporaries and was even further crafted by subsequent writers and artists as an *alter Christus*, or another Christ.

There was, however, less agreement in these early sources on the details of his life and death. Naturally, anecdotes contained in *vitae* vary as a result of authorial choice and intention. But the variations in Francis’s deathbed accounts warrant special attention. Specifically in five accounts of the saint’s death, Francis is said to have requested the presence of a specific woman: Lady Jacopa dei Settesoli, an aristocratic, lay woman from Rome. For most deaths during the European Middle Ages, the presence of a woman during the dying process and at death was routine. Women helped keep the dying person clean and as comfortable as possible, and they remained present to make the final preparations of the body for burial, by washing the body and wrapping it in appropriate shrouding. But for Francis of Assisi the anecdote of his request for the presence of a lay woman to be at his side as he was dying warrants explanation, since women had been forbidden to enter the enclosure of any of the friaries and since Francis himself had expressed intense anxiety about interactions with women. In addition the story of Jacopa’s presence circulated in limited circles, but originated in the stories told by Francis’s original companions. It would seem that some effort was taken to suppress and restrict the circulation of the story of Jacopa’s presence at Francis’s death.

This chapter argues that the particularly close spiritual relationship between Jacopa and Francis that is illustrated by her deathbed visit was suppressed and marginalized by administrators of the order because of its potential for misunderstanding and scandal. Subsequent
Lady Jacopa and Francis

historiography further suppressed the story. For Francis it may have been a simple truth that he experienced a respect and spiritual love for a particular lay woman that was so profound, that he requested her presence as a source of comfort at his death. But for his contemporaries and for many interpreters through the centuries since his death, such a relationship seemed so potentially scandalous, and the potential for misappropriating such a relationship so dangerous, it was best to manage the story by removing it from the written record. When the story was recorded in writing, it was told as a miracle with mystical elements so that the reports of a lay woman caring for the friar at his death would be disconnected from the normal, matter-of-fact event that it would have been considered outside of a Christian vowed religious compound. In this way, the authors preserved Francis’s saintly reputation by removing most of the ordinary details of bodily care offered by a woman that could be interpreted as unseemly and inappropriate. Even if the historical veracity of the story of Jacopa’s visit is questioned, it remains an important element in the hagiographic tradition of Francis since as a hagiographic theme the story of Jacopa’s visit completes the image of Francis as the mystical alter Christus. By presenting the figure of a woman with Francis as he died, the hagiographers who included the story of Jacopa’s visit cast Francis as following in the footsteps of Christ – indeed as another Christ. Therefore, this chapter explores the story of Jacopa’s visit as a plausible event that took place given the evidence of the spiritual connection between Jacopa and Francis. In an effort to protect the order from accusations of scandal, effort was made to remove the story from the hagiographical canon. When it was included in written form, the story was reframed into a miraculous account infused with mystical overtones to remove it from the ordinary. Within this reframing, hagiographers made use of Jacopa’s visit to cast Francis into the mystical figure of an alter Christus.

There are several sections to this argument. First, a delineation and analysis of pertinent original sources concerning Jacopa set the groundwork for showing how the story of Jacopa’s final visit to Francis was either framed as a miraculous occurrence of divine intervention or ignored completely. Within this discussion is an analysis of Jacopa’s role in the presentation of a particular mysticism credited to Francis in the hagiography through the image of him as an alter Christus, or another Christ. Second, a discussion on the complexity of how men and women interacted in the Christian Middle Ages with the twelfth-century lay movement of the vita apostolica and the
the thirteenth-century rise of the mendicant orders will help explain how Jacopa’s and Francis’s relationship came about and why it would have caused confusion and anxiety for the friars and for ecclesial authorities. Crafting the story into one of mysticism and miraculous divine intervention was the means taken to salvage the story of spiritual companionship and care at the time of death. A brief look at subsequent historiography will show how the story remains marginalized.

Splicing Together the Evidence for Jacopa and Francis

The textual evidence documenting Jacopa’s connection to Francis’s life is sparse. The written narrative accounts reporting her presence at Francis’s death are all hagiographic and date from the mid-thirteenth century or later. There is no independent telling of the story. There are, however, several pieces of legal and financial evidence documenting Jacopa’s life apart from this story. When spliced together these caches of evidence offer a picture of a distinguished benefactor of the early Franciscan order who very likely cultivated a close spiritual relationship with Francis and who certainly generously supported the order with property and her personal influence in Rome and Assisi.

Jacopa dei Settesoli

Jacopa was born in the late twelfth century and married into the powerful Frangipane family, a clan that engaged in ongoing conflict with the papacy and its Conti family connections through much of the thirteenth century. By 1212 when she met Francis during one of his evangelization trips to Rome, Jacopa was likely already a widow. As a widow she forged an independent path using her economic, social, and political resources for purposes she determined. For example in 1217 she unilaterally agreed to a peace agreement with the Holy See, thereby setting new precedents and reversing family allegiances. Jacopa’s independent policy was likely inspired by her spiritual conversion and deepening spiritual friendship with Francis as this new allegiance was completely unprecedented. Although her actions make it appear that Jacopa was deeply moved by the teachings of Francis, she did not presume to take up that central tenet of Franciscan spirituality—evangelical poverty—for herself. Instead, she used the resources she inherited to support the vocation of the friars. The extant document-trail reveals a woman who understood the fiscal resources she had inherited from
her husband, and put them to use as she saw appropriate. In addition to all the domestic responsibilities that rarely get recorded into textual evidence—caring for her family, tending to domestic economics, educating her children—Jacopa is known to have become a prominent benefactor to the friars, funding their first house and their first church in Rome. She traveled across Italy with a retinue befitting her station. This retinue required her administration and leadership. At Francis’s death, some sources report that she paid for his funeral and subsequently became a prominent benefactor for the building of the basilica of San Francesco in Assisi. Shortly after Francis died, Jacopa moved to Assisi to live out her life in relative peace and prayer, but she never renounced her property. Instead, she continued to manage her vast estate until she died. Her prominence to Francis and the early order is signaled by the fact that her remains were buried in the lower basilica of San Francesco in Assisi, and according to André Vauchez, she is the only lay person whose remains are buried there. Therefore from a wide range of sources independent of the hagiographic tradition, we know that Jacopa became an important benefactor of the Franciscan order and began supporting the order with political influence and significant material resources soon after meeting Francis.

Jacopa and the Hagiographic Narrative of Her Visit

In turning to the hagiographical sources that include the anecdote of her deathbed visit to Francis, we find plenty of correspondence to her characterization as a wealthy and influential woman, which could amplify the historicity of the episode. In addition there are intimations of the close cherished friendship and spiritual connection shared by Jacopa and Francis, which is obscured by the imposition of hagiographic topoi of miracle and mysticism.

The story of Jacopa’s care at Francis’s deathbed appears in five hagiographies of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries:

1. Thomas of Celano related the story in his Treatise on Miracles (ca. 1253), but significantly omitted it in his prior two vitae, which were both commissioned by ecclesial authorities. The story is discussed in the sections that follow.

2. The stories of Brother Leo and Francis’s early associates assembled into what is known as the Assisi Compilation (written between the 1240s and 1260) include the Jacopa story. Although the written text dates to the mid-thirteenth century, the stories recorded here are believed to record the memories of Francis’s earliest and most intimate companions,
therefore they are considered to be valuable sources with information only those close to Francis could know.

3. Bernard de Bessa’s *De Laudibus Beati Francisci* (written 1277–1283) offers a briefer account of Francis’s death, but stands out because it includes unique information about Jacopa’s life in Assisi after the saint’s death.

4. *Mirror of Perfection* (the manuscript of which was discovered by Ubertino da Casale in 1311 and is believed to have been written in the hand of one of Francis’s closest companions, Brother Leo) holds similar credibility as the *Assisi Compilation* in that it is believed to contain valuable first-hand accounts of Francis and the life he shared with his earliest companions.

5. *The Deeds of the Blessed Francis and His Companions* written by Ugolino Boniscambi of Montegiorgio 1328–1337 (which was subsequently reedited into the *Little Flowers of Saint Francis* after 1337) includes the story without significant additions. This source is furthest removed from Francis’s own life in date of composition, but became a highly popular source for his life, especially among the Spiritual Franciscans who sought to reclaim the original rigor of what they believed to be Francis’s devotion to apostolic poverty.15

As noted above, Jacopa’s life is adequately documented in financial and legal records, but none of these include the narrative or even the mention of her tending to Francis on his deathbed. Therefore we are forced to rely on the hagiographic tradition for this analysis. As reproducing each account would be unwieldy, a general summation and delineation of the most important details and variations will have to suffice here. There are a few standard elements to the Jacopa story that each version included.

First and foremost, Jacopa’s visit to Francis is presented in each of the *vitae* as a miracle. What could be seen as a rather ordinary account of a woman tending a close friend at the time of his death is recast into a miraculous encounter inspired by God. The heart of the Jacopa story is that as he nears death, Francis instructs a messenger to go to Rome to request her to come to him in Assisi, but she arrives there at the friary before Francis’s messenger had a chance to begin his task. The miracle of Jacopa’s prescience included her travel to Francis’s bedside from Rome to Assisi, which was no small matter since she traveled with a large retinue appropriate for someone of her noble standing. In addition she was prescient to bring various accoutrements that would be necessary for her care of the dying holy man. These included items to comfort Francis in his final days (such as a pillow, cloth or a tunic, and mostacciolo, an almond confection) and materials that would
be needed for an appropriate funeral (such as wax or candles and incense). While all hagiography contains miracle stories as a strategic means of illustrating the supernatural holiness of the saint, it is important to find the Jacopa story framed as a miracle, since women were routinely involved in the care of the dying and dead. Crafting the routine feminine care of the dying Francis as a miracle not only preserves the reputation of Francis as someone who normally kept his distance from women, but also prevented the story from becoming a model of behavior, lest other friars and laywomen take up similarly intimate friendships.

Protecting the reputations of both Jacopa and Francis was also a byproduct of the second common feature of the *vitae*, namely the emphasis placed on Jacopa’s special renown, having both social prestige as a distinguished Roman noble woman and having a special capacity for virtue and spiritual renown. Thus her proximity to Francis is presented as free from any unseemly accusations based on her flawless and distinguished reputation. This was done in a variety of ways including the use of dialogue, so that the figure of Francis was depicted as voicing his awareness of Jacopa’s noble status thus adding to the image of her flawless integrity. One example illustrating these shared components will suffice: the *Assisi Compilation* includes stories believed to have been told by Brother Leo and the earliest companions of Francis. The two standard elements of the story are found here and are brought into a lively narrative through the use of dialogue. This dialogue is noteworthy, not because this offers a verbatim account, but because it offers hints at how the companions remembered certain scenes. In the narrative as Francis declined in his final days, he is depicted as saying to his companions, “You know how faithful and devoted Lady Jacopa dei Settesoli was and is to me and to our religion. Therefore I believe she would consider it a great favor and consolation if you notified her about my condition. Above all, tell her to send you some cloth for a tunic of religious cloth the color of ashes... Have her also send some of that confection which she often made for me when I was in the City.” The narrative continues with the central miracle of the story: when the friar had written the letter and was about to leave to dispatch the note to Rome, he found that Jacopa had already arrived in Assisi. Disarmed by her presence and unclear what to do since women were not allowed in the enclosure, the brother asked Francis how to proceed. Francis responded, “This command need not be observed in the case of this lady whose faith and devotion made her come here from so far away.” She entered having brought with her
all that he had requested in the letter that had never been sent. Jacopa attributed the miracle of prescience to a voice she heard while praying, which said, “Go, visit your father, blessed Francis, without delay, and hurry, because if you delay long you will not find him alive. Moreover, take such and such cloth for his tunic, as well as the ingredients for making that particular confection. Take with you also a great quantity of wax and incense.” The addition of the incense, which Francis had not dictated in his letter, was attributed to “the Lord Himself” as a “reward and consolation for her soul.” Thus in this rendition, dialogue allows Francis to be attributed with words that highlight Jacopa’s special status, and allows Jacopa to attribute the miracle of her prescience directly to God.

A unique account of the miraculous arrival of Jacopa features gender inversion and is found in Thomas of Celano’s version of the story, which he inserted only into his last of three works on the life of Francis, The Treatise on Miracles of Saint Francis. Given the focus of the work, the story is couched in miracles and Thomas labels significant details of the story as miraculous: Jacopa’s arrival in Assisi; her having brought all that Francis dictated in an undelivered message; and her insistence that his stigmata, “such an unheard-of miracle,” be revealed to the public after his death. Of particular note is an often quoted appellation that Thomas reports Francis gave to Jacopa upon her miraculous arrival. As if to emphasize the supernatural character of her presence, Francis says, “Blessed be God, who has brought our Brother Lady Jacopa to us! Open the door and bring her in. The decree about women is not to be observed for Brother Jacopa.” This is the only vita that includes this appellation in this particular anecdote, yet it remains the most frequently repeated. The appellation implies that not only is Jacopa’s arrival a miracle, but her profound faith and service to the friars was unnatural for a woman, hence she warranted the appellation “brother.”

Thomas was clearly concerned with explaining why and how a lay woman could have been allowed proximity to Francis at his death. Jacopa’s special qualifications for this honor of presence at Francis’s death were established at the beginning of the chapter: “Jacopa dei Settesoli, equal in fame and holiness in the city of Rome, earned the privilege of special love from the saint. It is not for me to repeat, in praise of her, her noble lineage, family honor, and ample wealth, nor the great perfection of her virtues and long, chaste widowhood.” Given her noble rank and special spiritual status, Jacopa was given the privilege of holding Francis’s body after his death, “All wet with tears,
she was brought in private and alone, and the body of her friend was placed in her arms. ‘Here,’ said his vicar, ‘hold, even in death, the one you loved when alive!’ Her warm tears bathed his body, and with sobs and sighs she kept hugging and kissing him and pulled back the veil to see him unveiled.” With emotion and pathos, this scene conveys the human-level response to Francis’s death that is elsewhere in the anecdote veiled by divine intervention and aristocratic esteem.

In addition to the use of miracles to recast the Jacopa story into one that could evoke wonder from the reader, another element is found in four of the five accounts: the ordinariness of the scene is obscured by the casting of Francis as an *alter Christus*. The primary way the story figures into the hagiographers’ interest in presenting Francis as an *alter Christus* was to compare the scene to biblical stories, with Jacopa becoming the Magi who traveled to offer gifts to the Christ child or with Jacopa becoming a new Mary Magdalene who wept when Christ died. In either scenario, the appearance of Jacopa completes the mystical image of Francis as another Christ.

In the *Assisi Compilation* the author compares the story of Jacopa’s visit to the story of the Magi so that Jacopa’s arrival at Francis’s death is not only a miracle, but it is one of biblical proportions. Just as “[the Heavenly Father] inspired the Kings to travel with gifts to honor the child, His beloved Son, the days of His birth and His poverty, so too He willed to inspire this noble lady in a faraway region to travel with gifts to honor and venerate the glorious and holy body of His servant the saint, who loved and followed the poverty of His Son with so much fervor and love in life and death.” Rather than presenting the story of Jacopa as merely one of matter-of-fact compassion and care at the deathbed, this account presents her as having been called to serve Francis by none other than God the Heavenly Father. Jacopa is likened to the Magi, just as Francis is likened to the Christ child. As a hagiographic theme, Jacopa’s miraculous arrival furthered the image of Francis as an *alter Christus*. Francis becoming another Christ was not conceived of as a spiritual union, but instead as a physical becoming like the Christ child through Jacopa’s becoming the Magi through her noble status, her travel, and her arrival with gifts. Thus, the *vita* offers an account of the kind of physical and visceral mysticism that made up Francis’s spirituality, and it was made possible only through the appearance of Jacopa as the Magi. As a retelling of a visit that quite possibly really happened, it reveals an effort to turn the care a woman might give to a dying holy man into one of Biblical and divine proportions.
Three accounts overtly claim Jacopa to be another Mary Magdalene to Francis’s Christ. The likening of Jacopa to the Magdalene gave hagiographers the opportunity to add pathos to the narrative while fulfilling the image of Francis as an alter Christus.

When that Lady went inside to Saint Francis, who was still alive, the sight of each other gave them both the greatest consolation. Falling at his feet, stamped with divine markings [i.e. stigmata], she received there such consolation, grace, and abundance of tears, that just as the Magdalene washed the feet of the Lord with tears her faithful lips were pressing kisses all over the feet of one like another Christ, as she was devoutly crying and embracing them in such a way that the brothers were not able to tear her away from the feet of the saint.

Like Thomas’s use of the Magi story, this imposition of the Magdalene onto Jacopa in turn affects the figure of Francis by emphasizing his incarnate spirituality and positioning him as a new Christ.

While the above accounts stress the miraculous and biblical proportions of the story of Jacopa’s visit, Bernard de Bessa’s account differs by grounding the miraculous visit in true-to-life detail. Jacopa’s illustrious status is amplified by a description of her large retinue with whom she traveled, which “befitted such a great lady.” These details point to the social authority Jacopa carried. In addition, Jacopa is credited with having paid attention to every detail in bringing all that would be necessary for Francis’s funeral. Although these items are not delineated, it is clear that Bernard credits Jacopa with funding and administering the funeral. Francis’s own joy at Jacopa’s arrival offers a slightly different nuance to his relationship with her: “When the saint saw her, he rejoiced that as he had hoped, she had been sent by God. After recovering a little in the joy of seeing her, it was thought that the saint would live longer. Lady Jacopa, therefore, decided to send back a part of her retinue, so that she might await the saint’s end with fewer attendants. But the saint forbade this. ‘I will depart on Saturday evening,’ he said. ‘You can leave with your retinue on the following day.’” Bernard’s account offers a realistic and natural description of a dying man’s brief rebounding caused by the happy arrival of a cherished friend, and yet her arrival at all is still presented as having been sent by God and thus a miracle.

The other two accounts that include the Jacopa story do not offer significant additions or variations. But her prominence in the Franciscan community and her deep devotion to Franciscan spirituality is highlighted in the fourteenth-century work Deeds of Blessed
Lady Jacopa and Francis, in the unique mention of her arrangement to be buried in the Church of San Francesco in Assisi.24

Jacopa’s Fate with Hagiographic Censors

The figure of Jacopa and her role in Francis’s story did not fare well with the majority of hagiographers. Of particular note, those works that had been commissioned by ecclesial authorities failed to include any mention of her in any capacity including as a benefactor of the order. Significantly, the Jacopa story does not appear in the first two vitae written by Thomas of Celano (written 1229 and 1244–1247) nor does it appear in Bonaventure’s Vita Major (1260–1263). These three vitae were influential in shaping the authorized story of Francis as saintly leader of the order, therefore the absence of Jacopa suggests either a concern with the story or a total disregard of it.

Before Thomas of Celano wrote his Treatise on the Miracles of Francis discussed here, he was commissioned to write two vitae of Francis. His first work would be the first official vita of Francis and was commissioned by Pope Gregory IX in 1228 shortly before Francis’s canonization.25 The work was completed and approved by the pope by February, 1229. With this kind of ecclesial approbation it is not overly surprising to notice key differences in the presentation of Francis’s life.26 In particular, the death story reads very differently from the accounts based on the recorded memories of Francis’s close companions. There is no mention of Jacopa in the death scene. Instead, Francis is surrounded by friars and requests that they sing his Canticle and certain psalms. He takes a clerical stance by forgiving his brothers for their faults and absolving them. With the reading of the Gospel of John, Francis prepared for his own death by telling his brothers to cover him with a sack cloth and to sprinkle him with ash. In Thomas’s early version of the saint’s death, only friars attend: “Many brothers gathered there, for whom he was both father and leader. They stood there reverently, all awaiting his blessed departure and happy end. And then that most holy soul was released from the flesh, and as it was absorbed into the abyss of light, his body fell asleep in the Lord.” One of the brothers is said to have seen Francis’s soul rise to heaven thus adding a supernatural or miraculous tone to Francis’s death itself. This version credits Francis with leading and directing his brothers until his death. Without any of the comforts attributed to Jacopa in other versions, this vita situates Francis’s death within quasi-liturgical prayer services to create a scene of ritual reverence, but does not venture into the miraculous to describe the death. In the company of just the friars,
Francis’s dying and death need only reverent treatment; not miraculous or mystical overtones involving outsiders.

A similar inspirational reverence is found in Celano’s second vita, written in 1245–1247 at the request of the Franciscan Minister General Crescentius. In one of the most poignant scenes in all of Franciscan literature, Thomas writes:

As [Francis] was wasted by that grave illness which ended all his sufferings, he had himself placed naked on the naked group, so that in that final hour, when the Enemy could still rage, he might wrestle naked with the naked. That fearless man awaited triumph and, with hands joined, held the crown of justice. Placed on the ground and stripped of his sackcloth garment, he listed up his face to heaven, as usual, and totally intent upon glory, he covered the wound on his right side with his left hand, so no one would see it. Then he said to his brothers, ‘I have done what is mine; may Christ teach you what is yours!’

In this version Francis’s dying is witnessed by friars alone and is intended to be an inspiration for them. Seeing their emotional distress, Francis speaks to the friars to offer his final words of encouragement and then blesses them. Francis’s death is a piece of internal business for the friars, made public for broader inspiration only at the funeral and miraculous sightings.

Bonaventure’s Vita Major took a privileged place in the history of Franciscan hagiography because Bonaventure, as minister general of the order, was mandated by friars at the general chapter of Narbonne in 1260 to write the definitive vita of their founder. This was to replace all other circulating vitae, and therefore reflects not only the author’s spiritual and theological interests, but also his administrative concerns. Jacques Dalarun has delineated the “meticulous surgery” Bonaventure conducted on the hagiography with his eye on administrative challenges facing the order by the second half of the thirteenth century. Of particular note, Dalarun has shown how Bonaventure exalted Clare, the cloistered nun, over Jacopa, the lay aristocrat, in having a special spiritual rapport with Francis. While Bonaventure does not deny Jacopa’s existence or her connection with Francis, he excises her from the deathbed story, and includes a single story about her in which Francis gives her a lamb to care for and this lamb becomes her companion, accompanying her to church, and waking her up when she overslept so they could get to church. In place of the story of Jacopa’s visit to Francis as he died, Bonaventure reframed Francis’s death scene to highlight the presentation of Francis
as an *alter Christus*. Bonaventure creates this image by focusing on Francis’s final suffering without any reference to Jacopa: “Now fixed with Christ to the cross, in both body and spirit, Francis not only burned with a seraphic love into God but also thirsted with Christ crucified for the multitude of those to be saved.” The chapter emphasizes Francis’s physical suffering, which he bore with patience. Interestingly enough, Bonaventure casts Francis as another Christ through the natural suffering of his dying process rather than through miracles or biblical comparisons. For Bonaventure, as for Thomas of Celano in his early *vitae*, Francis’s death was a simple and natural “rebirth” by lying naked on the ground, dying as he had entered the world, offering words of consolation to the brothers. Instead, like Thomas in his *vitae*, the dying and death of Francis was an internal affair for the friars alone to witness and benefit from. Any mysticism implied in Francis as the *alter Christus* is completed through his natural suffering in the dying process.

**The Vita Apostolica and Gender Relations**

There are a few different reasons to explain the absence of the Jacopa story from certain hagiographies and its compartmentalization as a mystical miracle in others. The most logical explanation for the story’s exclusion is contemporary apprehension over publicizing the saint’s relationship—as innocuous as it may have been—with a lay woman for fear of assumptions and accusations made about the saint or even more likely, imitation of the spiritual relationship that could go awry among friars and women of lesser virtuous credentials. The interaction of men and women in vowed religious life had come to the forefront of ecclesial concern in the twelfth century as people in the burgeoning cities experimented with new forms of religious life that centered on imitating Christ and the Apostles in a non-cloistered, itinerant lifestyle. Mixed groups of faithful Christians—lay and ordained, men and women—formed to live in poverty and evangelize without constraints of monastic walls or even monastic rules. The Gospels contained the rules by which these enthusiastic believers sought to lead their lives of faith, hence their way of life came to be known as the *Vita Apostolica*, or Apostolic Life. This new exuberant expression of faith was not without its critics and not without disciplinary problems. The fact we know much about them at all can be attributed to disciplinary actions and polemical accusations against them. Francis’s ministry of itinerant evangelization needs to be set within this context of disciplinary concern and wariness.
As a result of this contemporary apprehension over gender relations in these new forms of religious life, Franciscan concern with women affiliates was deeply entrenched. Francis himself experienced serious anxiety about women among his followers. He therefore turned Clare over to Benedictines to shelter her religious vocation and included in his Rule for his fellow friars strict instructions forbidding contact between friars and women. In his *Regula non bullata* Francis warns, “let all brothers avoid evil glances and association with women. No one may counsel them, travel alone with them or eat of the same dish with them.” Francis’s own temptations concerning women were presented in hagiography, the most famous scene being his tempering an episode of sexual urge by throwing himself naked into a snowbank. As the order grew, increasing numbers of friars took action to limit the affiliation of women with individual friars and with the order as a whole in order to eliminate scandal and suspicion. In an academic treatise written in the late thirteenth century, one friar argued that the order should not promote any lay affiliates, but should be especially wary of female associates. Not only would they interfere and limit the freedom of the friars, but they would likely cause scandal especially if any one of them would become pregnant. The author argued that gossips would naturally point to friars as having a role in these shameful occurrences, and the distractions that resulted would disrupt the true vocations of the friars. Hence the order’s official stance was to limit contact with women.

Curtailing all contact with women, however, proved to be impossible and the reality of Franciscan life was very different from its official position. Called to pastoral ministry, Franciscans evangelized among the people by preaching in public squares and serving as confessors, and what we would call today as spiritual directors, to laity. In addition, there is evidence that despite the order’s official wariness of women, the friars cultivated important spiritual relations with many women of faith. Women who were famous to their contemporaries and important leaders in their own right, such as Rose of Viterbo (+1251/1252), Angela of Foligno (+1309), and Margaret of Cortona (+1297), all grew to take leadership roles in their local communities through their close affiliation with Franciscan friars. Their fame and influence, however, did not survive into the modern period when severe attitudes all but erased them from the tradition altogether. Therefore the role of women in the life and spirituality of the order grew to be even more complex in the subsequent historiography of the order. The case of the fate of the Jacopa story is yet another example of this ambivalence.
An indication of how deeply seated the concern over the Jacopa story became can be found in the eighteenth-century response of friar-scholars who were responsible for some of the earliest critical editions of relevant Franciscan texts. Reading the story of Jacopa and Francis in light of their own contemporary sensibilities, they found it to be shocking and incredible. The Bollandist scholar P. Suskyens, S. J., and the Francisan Conventual Assistant General Joseph Rugilio rejected the idea that Jacopa could have been present at the saint’s death since they were convinced that Francis would not have allowed a woman into the Portiuncula. Finding support for their views in Thomas of Celano’s omission of the story from his first two *vitae*, they never considered other reasons for Thomas’s editorial omission. Rugilio wrote, “We think…that she never served the holy man at his bedside, when he turned sick and finally, we consider it unworthy and shameful that it is held that while necessity forced it, while no serious and just cause demanded it, the very holy man, suffering at the end, went to his death wholly naked and lying on the earth before the face and the eyes of this Jacopa. This we reject as absurd.”

The Bollandists were following the practices of several centuries to suppress the notion of this lay woman tending to Francis as inappropriate and scandalous.

The suppression of Jacopa’s story has been most pervasive. Scholarly efforts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on Jacopa and her visit have been minimally circulated. Even highly accessible accounts of Jacopa’s deathbed service have lacked much influence. Using what could be called a hermeneutic of empathy or personal experience, Sr. Mary McGee wrote, “Jacopa took over. Men are not much use at the death bed…It was up to Brother Jack…She washed what had to be washed, tidied up the hut…Then she came back to Francis, bathed his battered face…She eased the painracked limbs, reverently tended the wounded hands and feet…Brother Jack stayed and cared for Francis until the end.” While such a folksy description of the work that Jacopa may have done at the bedside is usually overlooked by scholars, McGee’s assumptions about Jacopa’s role in Francis’s final days points to a realistic acceptance of the role of women that has generally caused embarrassment and even alarm to most interpreters of the scene to date.

**Conclusion**

The hagiographic treatment of Jacopa’s visit to Francis on his deathbed illustrates the historical ambivalence of laywomen in the Franciscan
spiritual tradition. Most hagiographers, especially those commissioned by ecclesial officials or having official administrative roles themselves, wrote about the death of Francis as a reverent event of concern to just the friars themselves. Surrounded by fellow friars, Francis died a natural death. Other accounts using the reports of the original followers of Francis, framed the death scene as the final occasion for his spiritual friend, the lay woman Lady Jacopa dei Settesoli, to care for him. To protect the saint’s reputation as well as that of the noble woman from Rome, these hagiographers imposed a veil of miraculous divine intervention over the story so that the gritty details of tending to a dying man would be carefully avoided and transformed into miracles. How death stories are told has both academic and practical significance. In this case, the final days and hours of Francis of Assisi, the Christian saint most associated with embracing an incarnational spirituality, have been managed by hagiographers to separate the holy man from the details of a woman’s care at the deathbed. If taken at face value, some of the stories of Jacopa at Francis’s deathbed offer an important example of lay participation in the Franciscan spiritual life through prayerful service and presence to the dying. But the pervasive ambivalence and institutional concerns over impropriety have reframed the tradition to one of miraculous mysticism or private concern of the order.

Notes


2. All early biographies of Francis need to be read as hagiography since they were all written in order to promote faith in his saintly status. As such they need to be read carefully, but clearly do include some biographical and historical detail in addition to hagiographical topoi. On the analytical use of hagiography see Jacques Dubois and Jean-Loup Lemaître, Sources et méthodes de l’hagiographie médiévale (Paris: CERF, 1993). Definitive editions and translations of all the early hagiographic texts related to Francis of Assisi are found in the three volumes of FAED.

3. Francis has been the subject of many scholarly biographies. Most recently and reliably see André Vauchez, Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint, trans. Michael Cusato (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

4. Belief in Francis’s receiving the stigmata was not uncontested even by Franciscans. On the stigmata and their meaning to Franciscan spirituality, see

5. The development of Francis as an *alter Christus* in hagiography and image is succinctly presented by H. W. van Os, “St. Francis of Assisi as a Second Christ in Early Italian Painting,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 7.3 (1974): 115–132. The image was not without controversy, as some near contemporaries took Francis to be the angel of the sixth seal, an apocalyptic reference used by zealous splinter groups who were persistently condemned in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. See Stanislao da Campagnola, *L’angelo del sesto sigillo e l’alter Christus* (Rome: Laurentium, 1971).

6. On women’s role in caring for the dying and the dead in the Middle Ages, see Christine Guidera, “The Role of the Beguines in Caring for the Ill, the Dying, and the Dead,” in *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, ed. Edelgard E. DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusick (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 51–72.


10. All extant property transactions and other legal documents related to Jacopa, including those involving the friars, have been collected, transcribed from printed editions, and translated into English by Urner, “The Search for Brother Jacoba,” in Appendix B, 286–306.


12. It is odd that there is no clear documentation for the death of Jacopa since she was clearly a woman of significant wealth and prominence. Her death date is given variously and without certainty as February 8, 1239 (the date still
used for her feast day) to 1273. The editors of *FAED*, Vol. 3, 474n. present the conflicting evidence without taking a stand on determining the date of her death. Wadding *Annales*, 1239 XIV places Jacopa’s death in 1239, while Paul Sabatier places it as October 18, 1273, because her name appears in a document in which “Domina Iacoba de Roma received a legacy of 20 soldi in a will of that date.”

13. Her remains were originally buried in the lower basilica of San Francesco and were only moved to their present place of prominence in the crypt in 1933 according to the editors of *FAED*, Vol. 3, 474n. Cf. Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 150.

14. References to each of these texts appear below with their analysis.

15. The popularity of the Jacopa story among the Spirituals lies outside the scope of this present chapter, but warrants further exploration especially in light of the growing awareness of female leaders, such as Angela of Foligno, among the Spirituals. On the Spirituals in general, see David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans. From Protest to Persecution in the Century after Saint Francis* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); on Angela and the Spirituals, see Jacques Dalarun, “Angèle de Foligno a-t-elle existé?” in *Alla signorina: Mélanges offerts à Noëlle de la Blanchardièrè* (Rome: École Franciscaine de Rome, 1995), 59–97.

16. The mention of the almond cakes in most of the accounts has particularly piqued the interest and likely the sweet tooth of readers through the centuries so that many people today reduce the story of Jacopa to one of her bringing almond cakes. For example, it is surprising that the only mention of Jacopa in a recent publication on Franciscan views and approaches to dying was merely to mention her bringing almond cookies to Francis. See Daria Mitchell, ed., *Dying, as a Franciscan: Approaching Our Transitus to Eternal Life Accompanying Others on the Way to Theirs. Spirit and Life. Essays on Contemporary Franciscanism*, Vol. 15 (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2011), 77.

17. For the story of Jacopa in the *Assisi Compilation*, see *FAED*, Vol. 2, 113–230, at 121–123. All quotes can be found here.

18. For Celano’s version of the Jacopa story, found in his *Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis*, see *FAED*, Vol. 2, 417–419.

19. Bernard of Bessa also refers to Brother Jacopa but does so to account for the “manly vigor of her virtues” and does not have Francis designate Jacopa as “brother” in order to allow her entrance into the cloistered area. See Bernard’s *De Laudibus Beati Francisi*, *FAED*, Vol. 3, 66.

20. The designation of the title “brother” on Jacopa is a complex issue that goes beyond the scope of this analysis. For various interpretations of this, see Dalarun, *Saint Francis of Assisi and the Feminine*, 132–133.

21. *Assisi Compilation, FAED*, Vol. 2, 122; *Mirror of Perfection, FAED*, Vol. 3, 222 (although this reference is absent from Paul Sabatier’s edition of the same work, *FAED*, Vol. 3, 355), and *Deeds of the Blessed Francis, FAED*, Vol. 3, 473–474. While Thomas of Celano does not explicitly call Jacopa a Magdalene figure, he does depict her insisting that Francis’s stigmata be revealed to the public after his death. Contemporary readers of the text would have likely understood that Jacopa was being cast as an *apostolurum*
Lady Jacopa and Francis

*apostola*, or “apostle to the apostles,” as Mary Magdalene was known. But it remains true that if Thomas implied this connection, he did so indirectly. On the image of Mary Magdalene in the thirteenth century especially among the friars, see Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 86–99.


24. Ugolino Boniscambi of Montegiorgio, *The Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions*, FAED, Vol. 3, 474. Vauchez adds that Jacopa was likely a generous benefactor to the friars in the building of the basilica and was the only lay person given the privilege to be buried in the basilica. *Francis of Assisi*, 150.

25. On Thomas of Celano see the introduction to his *vita* in FAED, Vol. 1, 171–179. The *Vita* is found at 180–308


31. *FAED*, Vol. 2, 591–592. This is a remarkable reframing of this woman given her prominent social and political role in Rome.

32. Herbert Grundmann’s study remains the starting point for understanding the complex changes in Christina religious life in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. See *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, trans. Steven Rowan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).


35. *FAED*, Vol. 1, 72–73. The complex relationship Francis had with women is analyzed by Dalarun, *Francis of Assisi and the Feminine*, see esp. 29–93 for Francis’s own stipulations in his Rules.

36. This scene is found in several hagiographies including Bonaventure’s sermon on Francis’s Feast Day in Paris in 1262, *FAED*, Vol. 2, 718–730, at 723–724.

37. The treatise, which was for a long time attributed to Bonaventure, is edited among his works, *Determinationes quaestionum circa regulam Fratrum*.
Minorum, Pt. 2, Q. 16, in Bonventurae Opera Omnis 8 (Quarrachi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1898), 368–369.

38. Jacopa’s temporal power and familial connections with the archenemy of the papal Conti family have led some scholars, including Carol Reilley Urner, to posit political reasons for the omission of Jacopa’s story especially from official vitae. Even if Jacopa began forging her own independent political path once she became a widow by 1212, as is evidenced by the treaty she signed with the papacy in 1217, she may still have been seen as too volatile a figure to be included in a work such as Thomas of Celano’s first vita, commissioned as it was by Pope Gregory IX, a member of the Conti family. At best this explanation would rationalize the absence of the story from the earliest hagiographies, but cannot explain the centuries-long absence and trivializing of the story. See Urner, “The Search for Brother Jacopa,” 86–94.

39. A brief exploration of this symbiotic relationship between lay women and Franciscan friars is found in my book, Women of the Streets.


In the early 1970s, the death awareness movement publicized dying as a human experience, spearheaded by Kübler-Ross’s *On Death and Dying* and other public education efforts on behalf of the dying and their families. One result was a sudden proliferation of personal narratives by the terminally ill and their caretakers, a literature whose intent was both to tell an individual’s own story, and to warn the rest of us mortals what it would be like to be a prisoner of modern medicalized dying. Although most of the protagonists admired and trusted their doctors and nurses, the alien and depersonalized environment of high-tech hospitals was, as in Kübler-Ross, a target of bitter reproaches. Dying was both sad and frightening anyway; how could we have made it so much more, by our futile efforts to defeat death at all costs?

But the narratives did more than complain. They showed how people mobilized support and responded as suffering humans to the existential crisis of impending death. In almost all of these, the narrators find “acceptance” and a sense of peace, purpose, and meaning as their life comes to an end. When a relative or close friend tells the story, the book may close with a funeral or an anniversary celebration, and with the assurance that something has been completed, and has been done well. Remember, these are published, carefully edited narratives rather than “raw experience.” Yes, there are some “bad deaths” and some very angry, bitter narrators—but these are the exceptions among the texts.
Now, autobiographies as a genre flourish in an era when available standard cultural models of how to be an ideal human being no longer seem compelling. An underlying assumption that each and every being is unique is part of the Enlightenment/Romantic heritage and therefore, in the words of Karl Weintraub, “each one has its own story.” When new realms of experience become open to autobiographical writing, as dying and grieving did during the 1970s, this sense of personal uniqueness turned into an imperative to tell one’s own story. The explicit reason given may be to inform the world about liver transplants, or to protest the social pressure put on women to undergo breast replacement surgery postmasectomy. But these worthy and rational goals were and continue to be fueled by the underlying desire to tell a unique story, with oneself or one’s loved one as the central protagonist. What was new was not this ideology, but the specific setting of hospitals, terminal illness, and bereavement. These topics became suitable for personal narratives, as they had barely been before the death awareness movement publicized them.

That having been said, the market for such narratives meant that even those of minor literary worth could be published as books, if they at least claimed to shed light on what it was like to suffer a life-threatening illness, or to become a Widow (Lynne Caine’s title). In this chapter, I confine myself to those personal narratives that deal with illness, dying, and death, published mostly in America during the era of sudden public awareness and discussion of medicalized dying. These all have in common the sense that the public needs to know about such painful and previously silenced experiences. Those who share them with us accept the Kübler-Ross diagnosis that American society has denied and repressed death, and therefore writing about it is both breaking a taboo, and a step toward necessary healing. Many of the experiences with hi-tech medicine are genuinely new, frightening, and mysterious. Organ transplant recipients may or may not be interesting people in themselves, but they have undergone a transition from impending death to a new life, unfortunately a life that usually depended on someone else’s death. Sometimes the diseases themselves are rare or mostly unknown. AIDS was an obvious example, new and disasterous and without cure. But in No Laughing Matter, Joseph Heller describes his ordeal with Guillan-Barré disease; as one of his friends remarks, “A disease named after two doctors must be really bad.”

A narrative about oneself is often a narrative of a self constructed, or in process of reconstruction. When done well, it has a plot, a beginning, a development, and a clear ending. Also, an autobiography should
show how the person who is the protagonist could become the person who now narrates the story. The characters portrayed should match, in other words. We should note too that a book in the form of journal entries is just as “constructed” as is a fulllength narrative. Journal entries may give the feel of “raw experience” recorded, but they are usually “the precipitate of the day,” to use Weintraub’s words. Even when the journal purports to serve as *The Screaming Room* (Barbara Peabody’s harrowing account of her son’s AIDS death) it is, once written down and edited and published, something more.

These basic reminders of the strengths and limits of autobiography as a genre set the stage for our exploration of mysticism and dying in contemporary persons’ experience. Given cultural permission to write about illnesses and medicine, authors took up the challenge and filled their pages with details of surgery, chemotherapy, blood test results, and all the equipment of the ICU. They wrote about the meanings of this array of medical realities, as well as about other things, which in the end mattered more: their humanity, the persons surrounding them, the memories and inner lives that made each one of them who he or she became. Within this context, what room if any is found for mystical or transcendent experiences?

**Heiler’s Prophetic versus Mystical Types of Experience**

One thing that stands out in this collection is the very minor role played by religion, and even an expansive, nontraditional, and openended view of religion will not change this judgment. Those authors who were clearly persons of faith did not focus on identifiably religious issues, but on life reviews, relations, and reconciliations with family—as well as on the aforementioned struggles with the medical environment. There was no preoccupation with an afterlife, divine judgment, or anything of traditional Christian eschatology. This was indeed an era of *The Eclipse of Eternity*, to borrow British sociologist Tony Walter’s title. Some of the few religiously oriented narratives stressed the pressure to be “a good witness” or struggle to let go of the hope for physical healing (David Watson’s *Fear No Evil*). I mention these two in particular, because unlike most of the rest they were published by religious presses, and might have appealed to readers patient with or even eager for religious discussions. Those readers would not have been entirely disappointed, but the topics focused on are quite distant.
from the traditional issues of “last things” or of theodicy (“why does God permit suffering?”).5

The most widespread spiritual theme in these narratives is that of surrender and personal trust in whatever God or Ultimate Reality or the Universe might have in store for the protagonists. For example, a particularly moving section of Frank Maier’s *Sweet Reprieve* describes how he lay in his hospital bed, unable to sleep, and tried to decipher the coded messages paged over the loudspeaker. Then, he focused instead on what lay beyond the hospital. He recited to himself the passage of Isaiah 49:15–16

*Can a mother forget the baby at her breast*  
*And have no compassion on the child she has borne?*  
*Though she may forget,*  
*I will not forget you!*  
*See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands*6

This expresses a profound sense of faith and hope amid crisis, coming from an author who described himself as one of those “good ole’ boys” who before his illness never gave spiritual matters a thought. Surrender and personal trust, however, are not necessarily “mystical.” Indeed, if one uses Friedrich Heiler’s famous dichotomy between the “mystical” and “prophetic,” most of the prayers and answers to prayers of the narrators would fall closer to the “prophetic” end of the scale. Heiler’s “mystical” type makes monistic experience of total “union” with the Divine or Ultimate a norm, while for him Luther was the exemplary Christian pray-er and an ideal type of the prophetic.7 Maybe more familiar today for Americans are the definitions of “mystical” championed by William James8 and W. T. Stace.9 These also are biased toward monism, nondual Vedanta being Stace’s benchmark of a mystical religion. By these definitions, the expectation would be that “mystical experience” among the dying would be a sense of “immersion” in the Divine, a loss of self, and of transcendent joy and peace. But the autobiographers simply do not report this kind of experience. Even when protagonists and narrators of autobiographies were familiar with such ideas, there is little evidence they drew on them when dying or when recording their last months and weeks.

A test of this claim is the absence of such experiences in the personal narratives of American Buddhists, presumably more distant from the Abrahamic “prophetic” type of piety as Heiler depicted it. Theories such as Heiler’s or Stace’s might lead one to expect that when Buddhists write personal narratives of their terminal illnesses, they
might sound more “mystical” than the rest. Instead, they too wrote about families, hospitalizations, and impending losses—not about the doctrine of Emptiness or no-self (*anatman*). *Lotus in the Fire* by Jim Bedard is a really fine example of this kind of down-to-earth narrative by a Canadian Buddhist. He knows all about detachment and the extinction of desire; he had been practicing Zen and living a Buddhist lifestyle for years when he got sick. Yet the actual story shows him interacting with his Catholic family, joking with his sister that if he receives a bone marrow transplant from her, he may begin reciting the Rosary! In *Hidden Spring: A Buddhist Woman Confronts Cancer*, narrator Sandy Boucher also tells of dinners with friends, emotional support during her treatments—rather than focus on Buddha Nature, or interest in reincarnation or the other eschatologies or philosophies of Buddhism.

This is more significant because another genre of American Buddhist books and teaching on dying and preparation for death did include such motifs. Stephen Levine’s *Who Dies?* is much more explicitly Buddhist and mystical than anything else we have mentioned, and it had many imitators. *Who Dies?* deals with dying as the dissolution of self, of false self, of the illusory substantial “I.” Preparation for dying—a life-long project but made more urgent for the terminally ill—is to rid oneself of this attachment to self. The dying person looks at his closet and asks, “Who was the person who wore all these clothes?” Like the clothes that will soon be given away, so the self has already been relinquished. If one sticks with a Heiler–James–Stace definition of “mystical” then surely this approach expresses the “mystical death” motif of the death awareness movement. Yes, but in a famous and very vivid anecdote from *Who Dies?* a Jewish woman comes to him, wanting to read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to her dying elderly mother. Levine suggests instead that she sing Yiddish folk songs! The particularity of this woman’s individual history and family and tradition trumps the attachment to a Buddhist ideal of no-self or conscious dying.

**Mystical Unselfing?**

Let us allow that there is a place in theistic Abrahamic faiths for a mysticism of “the dissolution of the self in God,” a union of the soul with the Divine so that its own being is shed just as those now-useless clothes in the dying person’s closet. This is a monotheist’s version of what Heiler et al. identified as “mystical,” with terms such as...
“immersion,” “dissolution,” and “passing away” (fana the term used in Sufism, designates this). But there are problems applying this to the kind of materials examined in this chapter. Put crudely, a narrator who “dissolves” can’t finish a book so that American readers will be able to make sense of it. Instead, images of trust and surrender can work, while representing the transition out of life. Joanne Kelley Smith ends her narrative Free Fall as an imagined jump into the sky supported only by a loving God as her death approached. She didn’t view this as the ending of identity and self; it was more an image of total trust. That’s how she ends her story. Perhaps the genre of writings here has built in limits for such possibilities as the classical “immersion in God” of much mysticism. The narrative must provide a sense of “closure,” and therefore someone must be somehow still there to write a fitting conclusion. As in Smith’s case, the narrative “closure” comes with a vision of one’s soon-to-occur death; in an appendix a relative will write about the author/protagonist’s actual physical death, which lies outside the story itself.

But when death is imagined as “the end of everything,” this can be very different from mystical unselfing. One of the most disturbing autobiographies, Emmanuel Dreuilhe’s Mortal Embrace: Living with AIDS, ends as the author compares himself to Hitler committing suicide in his bunker, when his impending death will annihilate both him and AIDS together. Here the death of the self is expanded into the death of everything, the destruction of the world with no hope of continuity or connection beyond. Much more typically, the end of Frank Maier’s life comes as he knows his transplanted liver will fail soon, but he is grateful that he lived long enough to discover his true vocation as a grandfather. Just as God found joy in the child he will never forget or forsake, so this narrator too finds fulfillment in being present for a small child. To write this kind of conclusion to an autobiography, one needs a self, albeit one changed from the protagonist at the start of the story.

**Dying with Jesus**

There is a more explicitly Christian kind of “mystical death,” and that harks back to Paul the Apostle. Paul shares in Christ’s suffering and death, he has “died with Christ,” and the true self who now lives within him is the Christ who died and rose again through the power of God (Gal. 2:20). “Sharing in Christ’s dying” was what Albert Schweitzer, long ago, thought of as the true essence of The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle. One might call this theme “dying with Jesus.” Applied to
the dying Christians of the past, one finds this theme in the medieval *Ars Moriendi* literature. A recent theological work by Allen Verhey takes up the challenge of appropriating this for contemporaries in *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus*. Verhey must nevertheless object to the “commendation of death,” the glorification of death/afterlife over this life, which pervades the medieval literature.  

The tradition of identification with the suffering and dying Christ has carried with it certain other meanings that are also problematic or at odds with contemporary sensibilities. Not only the “commendation of death” but the glorification of pain featured in that model. Julian of Norwich’s *Showings* begins with an account of her near-mortal illness, in which she directly identifies with a vision of the suffering, bleeding Christ on the cross. This vision is not for the fainthearted. “All the pains that ever were or ever will be—and all of this I understood Christ’s Passion for the greatest and surpassing pain—was shown to me in an instant.” The emphasis is on heavy flow of blood from his head, and excruciating physical agony. Here indeed we have an example of Christian mystical dying, but is it an ideal for today?  

This question is not easy to answer. First, physical pain—so prominent in Julian’s account—is not a death awareness motif. It played no role in *On Death and Dying*, entirely eclipsed as a concern by psychological pain (denial, anger, depression) and in this the personal narratives follow. Perhaps contemporary palliative care is really so effective that no one needs to fear physical pain any more, as Ira Byock promises us in *Dying Well*. More likely, authors know that writing about physical pain is not very interesting, any more than a recitation of blood test results will be. To the extent that passion mysticism such as Julian’s gave meaning to physical pain in an era way before effective pharmacological palliative care, there is a reason why it may have been so important to dying Christians. But this would strike most of the recent narrators as bizarre.  

There are other dimensions of Christ’s sufferings that Paul stressed, and which might in theory provide the basis for a new Christian mystical dying. For Paul the humiliation undergone by the Son of God was a necessary stage in the drama of world salvation.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus,  
Who, being in very nature God,  
Did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,  
But made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant (Phil. 2:5–7 NIV)
The more traditional translation is “emptied himself,” and here we do have a Christ-centered vision of “unselfing,” although “the nature of a servant” replaces divinity. For Paul as an individual, Christ’s humility was the model for his own long list of humiliations, hardships, and punishments, whose result was that he had come to recognize that all he had lost in the way of worldly respect and possessions was no more than “refuse.” The surpassing riches of knowing Christ was enough for him.

Contemporary authors do not compare themselves to Christ directly here. And yet, one of their frequent self-discoveries is how much they had depended upon a false security of public dignity and control over their own bodies. Throughout their lives, they had unconsciously congratulated themselves for that control, for the power of being about to order their limbs, regulate their bowels and bladders, and eat, chew, and digest. Now they have lost some of that. This is terrifying, but also—in at least some cases—liberating, as paradoxically they gain knowledge of a different kind of strength. Issues of control and loss of control pervade these accounts; in some cases these are the dominant theme. In a scene that appears to capture the horror of sudden loss of control, narrators with cancer undergoing chemotherapy treatments watch helplessly as their hair falls out in clumps, clogging the shower drain. As it slides down into the pipe below, so too their sense of their own appearance and identity seems to vanish with it. They may respond by taking “bald pictures,” and loved ones may even shave their heads in sympathy, as did Gene Wilder, husband of Gilda Radner in *It’s Always Something.* But this is an intrinsically humbling experience, which for many narrators becomes a clue to the path into the strange world of life-threatening illness.

Is there a pattern of identification with Christ, whose humiliation could not have included this uniquely modern experience, but which did make him a potential role model for physical deprivation and vulnerability? If such exists, it is far from the responses shown by recent narrators, and recommended to readers. Christ was led “like a lamb to the slaughter,” and like a sheep before its shearers, he was mute. He had emptied himself of both divine and human pride. In contrast, some protagonists in autobiographies respond to humiliation not by “making themselves nothing,” but by reasserting a new kind of control under paradoxical circumstances. Choreographer Agnes DeMille suffered a severe stroke, and underwent many medical tests. To prepare for one of these, she was stripped naked by two young interns and her abdomen was painted. They expected she would be deeply shamed; we the readers also expected this response. Instead, she recalls
“I was naked and helpless and marked up like a sacrificial calf for three hours” and yet “it was on the whole, a very nice experience spiritually.” To be treated as a lump of flesh rather than as a person normally humiliates, and this is one of the most standard criticisms of the medical environment. But here, DeMille speaks up for a paradoxical sense of dignity and integrity in the midst of this scene.

Agnes DeMille was not a Christian; she tells us that it was her devout sister, suffering from cancer, who could make sense of suffering. And yet, eventually, even Agnes experiences the wisdom of surrender, of letting go. She records an experience when “I suddenly was aware that I was happy, happy in a way that I had not been before. Happy in the moment, contented, trusting. It was enough somehow…Great ideas are not promoted from this nerveless state, nor great art, nor in truth anything at all, except possibly great wisdom.” This is as far as she was willing to go. The book ends not with her death or permanent disability, but with her triumphant return to direct a dance performance. She is back in control. So, we have met something that looks vaguely like mystical unselfing and surrender, but this experience does not have the final say here in narrative. As with humiliation, loss of control is temporary.

There is indirect evidence that the theme of sharing Christ’s sufferings played more of a role in the dying of some protagonists than their narrators themselves wanted to discuss. Two examples of this come from stories told by widows. Sandra Albertson’s young husband Mark and she were Quakers, and the primary role of their religion in the story is to express gratitude for the community of Friends (in both senses). Peace, acceptance, and a naturalistic framework of Endings and Beginnings dominate her tale. And yet, as part of Mark’s preparation for death, he practiced a meditation on Jesus’ death as a way to structure and find meaning in his own death. His wife notes this, but it is not perceived by her as a resource for others, nor does it particularly resonate with the Kübler-Ross message of the book. Mark had a private piety, in other words, that was real for him but not what American readers would have found most interesting. And maybe not what his wife was prepared to explore or relate to her own sufferings as a caretaker and griever. Another example is the behavior of husband Ted from Madeleine L’Engle’s A Two-Part Invention. The L’Engles were both Christians, she had authored some well-known religiously grounded books for young adults (A Wrinkle in Time). While L’Engle recalls Ted’s final illness, his own sacramental sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ as an important dimension of his end-of-life
experience, this is not the primary story she wants to tell. The story of their marriage and life together, the Two-Part Invention of her title, eclipses any explicitly religious devotional or mystical practice. Her tale is not an updated Ars Moriendi, in other words.23

Comparison with Near-Death Experiences

If “sharing in Christ’s sufferings” is not a featured theme for these autobiographies, then what about the less traditional image of “going toward the light,” or “entering the light.” This appears in works that appeared simultaneously with the flood of autobiographies. Betty Eadie’s Embraced by the Light24 and all the rest are narratives of “near-death experiences,” out-of-body travels, and what lies beyond, in Life after Life.25 These are part autobiography, part compilation of others’ narratives, and some information about the prevalence and aftereffects of NDEs. We are by now familiar with the scenario of separation from one’s physical body, travel through a dark tunnel, and encounter with a Being of Light. These books include trips to Heaven, and often are written to “prove” some specific eschatological belief. Most emphatically, I note the almost complete absence of this kind of experience in the collection of autobiographical narratives dealing with impending death. Tunnels, light, and out-of-body experiences are just not there, even when one might expect they ought to be. As if to support this generalization further, one story of an extended coma—and near-death situation—insisted that the narrator remembered little except a dream of battling forces during her nine days of unconsciousness. Titled Wake Me When It’s Over, the author, Mary Kay Blakely, emphasizes the invisible spiritual support of her New Age feminist friends, who sent healing thoughts her way.26 For the true NDE-er of the Eadie type, “waking up” is a reluctant return to a gray world after the sojourn in the realm of light.

The very partial exceptions to this are two interesting narratives, neither one of which could possibly be confused with one of the Light Eadie-and-Moody books. In Marvin Barrett’s Spare Days he does enter a different state of consciousness while in the hospital, as his life is flickering out. The next morning, he is lying in bed back in his normal mode of existence. His doctor turns to him, points a finger at his chest, and says: “Dead. Dead.” What Barrett knows he means is: “Alive, alive.”27 It is a miracle that the sick man, dead the night before, now is alive. Barrett, who tells us he has followed the teachings of English mystic Gerald Heard, is aware of the mystery and power
of this experience. Will he use it to give readers glimpses of a realm beyond this life? No. After he had shared this episode, he is ready to tell what has haunted him all his adult life. When a child, he had been indirectly responsible for the death of his younger brother, and his experience of “Dead. Dead” has enabled him to face this and forgive himself.

Even less like the NDE scenes of tunnels and the light is a strange experience from Douglas Hobbie’s account of the death of his young adult daughter, Being Brett. Shortly before her death, Brett has a vision that lasts several hours. It is of thousands of photos, each of an individual’s face. These fall slowly from the sky, like a gentle snowfall or perhaps a giant deck of cards. It is as if, while dying, she joins all those who are already dead but whose portraits are stored and released for her. No explanation of this unusual experience is given, but it made a profound impression on both the dying woman and her father; her secular family reports it as a mysterious, unsettling, and yet beautiful experience, part of their daughter’s legacy. While there may be other grounds to debate the merits, validity, and authenticity of the Light books, the autobiographical texts here simply show that contemporary dying does not necessarily fall into their pattern, and in fact ignores fascination with post-death realities.

Conclusion: Ritual, Not Mysticism

How can we interpret and reflect on the meager results of this search for traces of “mystical dying” in these autobiographical accounts? The experience of terminal illness under hi-tech medicine was not new, but talking and writing about it from the patient’s point of view was. In a book whose author’s stated intention was to tell about liver transplants from the patient’s point of view, it is remarkable to find the quality of human insight and interest that Frank Maier’s Sweet Reprieve turns these into human stories, not medical facts. But religion is not a major feature of these stories. Perhaps that is because their authors work within the framework set by Kübler-Ross and the other leaders of the death awareness movement. Death is a natural event and we should therefore accept it. Death is loss, and to prepare for it is to cope gradually with impending loss, whether or not in “five stages” isn’t important. Others’ lives will continue; there are both Endings and Beginnings. Overwhelmingly, this naturalistic, psychologically oriented framework is accepted unquestionably for personal narratives. Whatever their theological convictions, whatever private devotional practices or meditations
they might engage in, the world the narrators live, write, and die in is defined by these assumptions. America may have been “A Nation of Mystics” in surveys of widespread personal experiences, but when it came to matters of death and dying, we really weren’t.

Moreover, as psychologist Robert J. Lifton claims in his book *The Broken Connection*, sheer transcendence is inadequate to frame meaningful connections between life and death, individuals and those who will survive them. This helps explain why there is one dimension of “religion” that does appear regularly in all sorts of places in these narratives: ritual. In one type of ritual, the dying person stages a sacred special goodbye, bequeathing objects and memories to family and friends. Or the ritual is a funeral or memorial where ashes are scattered, poems are read, a person remembered. People plant trees, sew quilts, and more than ever do ritual acts together. All of this is recorded by the widow/survivor who tells the story. Just as the stories themselves were most often focused on the circle of family and friends, so it is important to have all of these assembled before or soon after the death. To call these rituals “religion” is an overstatement. But as rituals, they serve to close out the story. They also remind the protagonists and the readers that Hitler’s bunker is not the last word; destruction and isolation are not the ultimate realities. Lifton is correct: continuity and connection between death and ongoing life are truer to the human condition than death as absolute negation. Something sad but good happens when people gather to affirm this and do ritual together.

That, I believe, may be why “mysticism” and “mystical experience” is alluded to so little in these books. Mysticism has often been presented for Americans as an individual expression and activity, as purely private peak–experience. There is certainly space for it in these autobiographies, but it is minor space. Because the more pressing problem is the isolation of the dying, their sense of aloneness, and the severe isolation of those who care for them. For some, the experience of terminal illness is like being sent to the moon. The most powerful antidote to this moon exile is not a private transcendent experience but an affirmation of connection, concretized by a group gathering. Ritual becomes a sign not that death can be “conquered,” but that we who are here still have one another. It doesn’t seem to matter what the beliefs are about ultimate reality, the nature of persons or destinations for the dead. It doesn’t matter that grieving as a process may go on for years after the time frame of the narrative. The scene that closes the story affirms the value of life and living, of human connections and continuities, even when dying and death are not excluded.
5. David Watson, *Fear No Evil* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1984). David Watson was a leader of the British Charismatic Renewal, and he wrote in part to counter the simplistic theology that God always intends to heal us, and it is only our own lack of faith that thwarts his intention.
Traces of Resurrection: The Pattern of Simone Weil’s Mysticism

Stuart Jesson

In her “Letter to a Priest,” Simone Weil makes the following, typically bold, assertion concerning belief in the Resurrection: “Hitler could die and return to life again fifty times, but I should still not look upon him as the Son of God. And if the gospel omitted all mention of Christ’s Resurrection, faith would be easier for me. The Cross by itself suffices me.”¹ This statement has often served as an indication that Weil’s version of Christian mysticism has no place for the Resurrection. Throughout the collection of short essays, articles, and notebooks produced at the end of her life Weil reflects frequently, in profound and intriguing ways, on the significance of death, its effect on human thought, and its place in moral and spiritual life. Not only is death “the source of all untruth and of all truth for men,”² the crucifixion of Christ becomes the center not only of her spirituality, but also of her metaphysics; creation, for Weil, is the cross that crucifies God.³ In some of the more extreme formulations scattered through the notebooks, in particular, Weil gives that impression that she sees life as a cosmic mistake that it is the task of spiritual life to rectify, through acceptance of death: “Birth involves us in the original sin, death redeems us from it.”⁴ Death is the humiliating destiny of all finite creatures, but if one can refuse the various compulsive ways there are of evading the thought of this, and consent to, or even love this necessity, one thereby participates in the process of “decreation,” the eradication of the autonomous self. All this adds to the sense that the deepest
structures of Weil’s thought support the terse statement above: hers is a mysticism of death, not Resurrection.

In what follows I examine the basic shape, or pattern, of Weil’s understanding of mystical insight and/or transformation. I then proceed to explore the theological significance of certain conceptual tensions that appear within this understanding, tensions that relate closely to her ambivalence toward the idea of Resurrection.

**Losing and Saving One’s Life**

A particularly notable entry from Simone Weil’s Marseilles notebook states that real spiritual awakening is like death: “One must place one’s life in something one cannot touch on any account. It is impossible. It is a death. It means no longer being alive. And that is exactly what is wanted.” Before examining Weil’s work in detail, then, I would like to introduce a set of conceptual issues through examination of one of the most important sayings attributed to Jesus of Nazareth: “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” In an analogous way, this saying suggests that death may be less opposed to life than one might expect. The saying warns that when it comes to the ultimate “saving” of life, all is not as it seems: loss can be gain, and the desire to gain may lead to loss. At first glance, the saying appears to announce a dramatic reversal of perspective, and by doing so, to put the human capacity to evaluate, and to act based on such evaluation, into question.

Upon closer examination, however, an important aspect of the saying complicates the picture somewhat— the desire for life. As we will see, Weil tends to see the determinative factor in human life as being the desire for the good, and is interested primarily in how this desire can be redeemed from its distorted forms, and rarely talks about the idea of desiring one’s “life” as energy to be transformed or harnessed. The gospel saying rests on the assumption that although one may not know exactly what it is that one desires when one desires “one’s life,” one is right, nonetheless, to desire it. The verse that immediately follows in Mark’s version makes this clear: “For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?” Life’s value is such that it cannot be measured by any comparison, or be the subject of any exchange. And indeed, it is the concern for one’s life that would cause one to listen to such wisdom, for if one did not much care either way whether one “gained” or “saved” one’s life, then neither the warning nor the
promise would be of any interest. It is because one wants to live—even if one is not entirely clear on what one wants when one wants to live—that the saying grabs one’s attention. However, the desire or pursuit that the immeasurable value of one’s life inspires is ambiguous, and subject to warning and scrutiny; the question it, seems, is not of whether to desire one’s life, but of how. As we will see, in an analogous way, for Weil it is not a case of whether one desires the good, but of how; at what “level” one places, or conceives of, this good.

If the saying is unintelligible apart from the assumed desire to “save” one’s life, one may well wonder whether an overly philosophical interpretation may miss the eschatological dimension of these words: alongside the appearance of a principle concerning evaluation (that things are not as they seem; that to seek to secure possession of “one’s life” is to lose it; that apparent loss is really gain) is something much more like a promise: those who lose their lives “for my sake” will gain it; that is, they will in fact attain that which they desired. It is in hope of actually gaining one’s life, not simply of learning to see or value it differently, that the disciple is prepared to choose to lose their life. Two obvious ways of understanding this text present themselves, then: on one hand, eschatologically, as an expression of a promise; on the other hand, more rationally or philosophically, as an articulation of a principle.

An important question also arises here concerning the distinction between saving and losing one’s life, and, presumably, the difference between living and dying. The whole force of the saying depends on the distinction between loss and gain, losing and saving, and yet at the same time, in all these cases, these distinctions seem close to dissolving. It seems as though this instability is crucial to the transformative potential of these ideas: one may turn out to have been fundamentally mistaken not just about what it means to die, but about what one’s “life” really was. As we will see, many of the most interesting of Weil’s reflections on mystical experience depend on the distinction between emptiness and fullness, hunger and satiety, life and death, while at the same time seeming to suggest a fundamental upheaval of these distinctions.

A similar issue can also be discerned in the “beatitudes.” Each beatitude follows the same pattern, with a group defined by a characteristic linked to state that is announced as “blessing.” However, the relationship between the present condition and the “blessedness” that corresponds to it can be construed in a number of different ways. Perhaps most obviously, some of these sayings seem to affirm that despite their condition the poor in spirit, the meek, the grieving, or the persecuted
are, or will be, blessed. The blessing that is the coming of the kingdom does not respect the distinctions that usually distinguish the fortunate from the unfortunate, just as the sun shines on the just and the unjust. And so blessedness may be absent—or hidden—at present but it is nevertheless still obvious—it consists in receiving the kingdom of heaven, in inheriting the earth, in being comforted. One does not have to be told why one is blessed in inheriting the earth, or in being comforted; such things are a blessing, and there is nothing counterintuitive about the nature of the blessing, only in the divine choice of recipient.

However, another logic also suggests itself through some of the sayings. The merciful will receive mercy, surely, because of the mercy they have showed; the pure in heart will see God because that was what they desired above all else; those that hunger for justice or righteousness are rewarded according to their hunger. These sayings, then, may announce a completion in which the full significance of present actions or attitudes is fully developed and recognized; the peacemakers are finally named as the children of God they always were. In the former case, the difference between hardship and reward is relatively stable; in the latter case, slightly less so: perhaps certain kinds of hunger are already a blessing, however well-disguised. Finally, and perhaps most problematically, the first and last of the beatitudes end with “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” suggesting perhaps that the kingdom of heaven is already present in poverty of spirit and persecution, and that the values of the kingdom are plainly and simply opposed to earthly values.

But then, if poverty of spirit and persecution can be manifestations of the kingdom (persecution, in particular, is described as being a sign of one’s inheritance of the kingdom, the mark of an authentic prophet), what is it that makes inheritance of this kingdom a blessing, rather than a curse? If the persecuted are receiving the kingdom of heaven in and through their persecutions, why should one desire this kingdom at all? In other words, there is also the hint here that what is announced is an inversion of ordinary human valuation. But proclaiming an inversion of human values, affirming that wealth is poverty, weakness is strength, and suffering, joy, is far from straightforward. If it is to be the case that poverty can manifest a kind of wealth, what is it that makes this poverty wealth, if not wealth? Speech rebels against the attempt to simply invert values, because articulating such an inversion requires an affirmation: if all values are overturned on what basis does one affirm anything – what is it that one is doing when one affirms? If the blessings of the kingdom appear as paradoxically opposed to all usual notions of blessing, why should one count them as blessings at all?
The beatitudes seem, then, to suggest all three of these dynamics (and probably more), and in each of them the values of the kingdom are at a different distance from, and in a different kind of relationship to, mundane valuation, and distinctions that such valuation perceives. In the same way, in the saying about the losing and saving of life, there is the hint of a dramatic subversion, inversion or reversal of perspective, but at the same time, there is no wholesale rejection of one’s natural desire for life. My suggestion, here, is that the particular power that these sayings possess rely on this ambiguity. It could be that one finds out that in the kingdom of heaven, true value is almost the reverse of what one expected, such that one finds one was not only looking in the wrong place, but looking for the wrong thing in the first place (as Paul seems to suggest at the beginning of his first letter to the Corinthians). Equally, however, it could be that one discovers how to find the very thing one had longed for. Although I do not have the space to justify the assumption here, I will be assuming that this ambiguity, or instability, correlates in some way to the basic shape of the Christian narrative: in the Resurrection, the crucified Christ is re-presented, and the cross is given meaning. But because the meaning of this death is only given, presented, or recovered through its undoing, there is no simple presentation of whatever it is that is demonstrated, achieved, or exemplified by the cross. The Resurrection presents and transforms, or transforms as it presents: this leaves a tremendous ambiguity as to how we can see meaning in death, or indeed, see meaning in a particular approach to death as a way of living. If the death of Jesus can be said to bring life, we are left with the question of what, in this case, we mean by “death,” just as, if it is the crucified Jesus who is raised to life, we are left with the question of what, in this case, is meant by “life.”

In what follows I will try to follow similar conceptual contours as they appear in a number of important passages from Simone Weil’s religious writings, especially those that attempt to articulate moments of mystical upheaval, and that are concerned with the transformative potential of an encounter with the thought of death, emptiness, or “void.”

**Death, Imbalance, and the Void**

One can see in Weil’s work the conviction that one’s orientation toward one’s death is somehow determinative of one’s whole being. The acceptance of death is linked with a traumatic reorientation of the whole of one’s life, which is described in a number of different ways, with
different images and metaphors, although we will only have space to examine two of these fairly briefly.

First, Weil’s understanding of the operation of human desire, thought, and action is often expressed in terms of compensation, balance, and the search for equilibrium. For example, one might hope for an expression of praise or thanks that seemed proportional to the energy one imagines oneself to have expended on a particular task, or revenge in proportion to the indignity one imagines one has suffered, and so on.9 Weil often links this search for balance with the idea that suffering of various kinds can be thought of as a loss of energy; we are prepared to lose energy for the sake of some future gain, but the thought of a loss of energy without compensation is intolerable. Weil sees this tendency as the source of all manner of deception, as the search for equilibrium is “bad because imaginary”; we are left perpetually striving after an equilibrium that never comes because it is impossible.10 Because one continually sees the world through the lens of the desired equilibrium, one never pays attention to things as they are, but “cloaks” them with the thought of the satisfaction, restitution, compensation, or reward they are imagined to promise us.11 However, Weil thinks that this tendency is deeply rooted in life itself, insofar as each living thing acts as an inside that appropriates what lies outside it for its own purposes, for its own future.12 It follows, then that to contemplate things as they are, “unshrouded by some imagined future,” is to see things as though one were dead; “[o]ne has to be dead to be able to see things in their nakedness.”13

In one sense, then, to refuse to seek compensations or balance—whether this is through the act of forgiveness, through accepting a lack of recognition or reward, or through honestly attending to the reality of some present suffering—is also to accept death, as she notes memorably on one occasion: “To forgive debts. To accept the past without asking for future compensation. To stop time at the present instant. This is also the acceptance of death.”14 Conversely, the dynamic that she describes as “the search for equilibrium” is itself the manifestation of the denial of death. There is a sense in which death is the ultimate sign of imbalance, for it marks the point beyond which no counterbalance, repayment, or compensation is possible, and marks out our lives as essentially unbalanced and unfinished. To accept death is to accept that one’s vital energy is essentially limited, and that one is destined to lose all of it. As a result, the thought of death itself calls for a “counterweight”; here she has in mind the way that the meaning that is sought in life may often be a way of trying to produce something that defies,
resists, or survives death.\textsuperscript{15} The thought of death produces a panicked reaction, in which one seeks an opposite to cancel it out, but this reaction in fact prevents life being loved as what it is, because all valuations based on the threat of death simply turn life into death’s opposite.\textsuperscript{16} In this way, it is only the contemplation and acceptance of death that reveals life in its contingent finitude—which is its reality—rather than a mere counterweight to death. This is seen in one of the notebook entries that were compiled in the collection \textit{Gravity and Grace}:

If we go down into ourselves we find that we possess exactly what we desire. If we long for a certain being (who is dead), we desire a particular, limited being; therefore, necessarily, a mortal, and we long for that special being “who”...“to whom”...etc., in short that being who died at such and such a time on such and such a day. And we have that being—dead.\textsuperscript{17}

Here the point is not that this change in perspective removes the pain of loss, but that the pain of loss is now the way in which reality is being given to us, insofar as it is the result of the limited particularity that was part and parcel of their very being.

To summarize, then, the refusal of compensatory psychological mechanisms involves a kind of death, insofar as it means to see the world in its own reality, free of the distortion produced by the drive to continue in one’s own existence. On the other hand, it is death itself that produces this compulsive form of life; death is both poison and cure, a \textit{pharmakon}.

Using a slightly different set of concepts and related images, Weil makes a very similar point in terms of the attempt to “fill the void.” “Void” is experienced primarily in terms of the impossibility of desire, and the meaninglessness of suffering.\textsuperscript{18} One of Weil’s deepest convictions seems to have been that the experience of being human in the world was essentially the experience of an insatiable desire for something inaccessible, or the experience of an absence—the absence of any final good “here below.”\textsuperscript{19} The desire for the good is not so much something one has, as something one is,\textsuperscript{20} and yet this desire is for something inaccessible and absent.\textsuperscript{21} To accept this is to accept that the hungry core of one’s being is destined to remain unsatisfied, and that nothing that one can obtain, or even aim at, reduces this tension. This means that there is a kind of impotence and emptiness at the heart of one’s own being, and to accept this means to surrender one’s capacity for self-determination. In a sense, then, the experience...
of “void” is integral to being human at all; it is the result of being finite creatures that contain, or in sense are, a desire for a transcendent, inaccessible good. The “void” is the “immeasurable gulf” between the transcendent good that we desire, and the finite world, dominated by “necessity,” which is our home. As a result, she is deeply suspicious of religious notions—for example, various doctrines concerning life “after” death—that can function so as to allow the needy ego to evade the contradiction of its own existence, because the saving truth lies in this contradiction. Without the acceptance of this “immeasurable gulf,” one has no real sense of what the good is; in Weil’s terms, one conceives good at the wrong “level.” Any idea or doctrine that encourages one to do this is deeply suspect. One of the more memorable remarks in *Gravity and Grace* reads:

> We must leave on one side the beliefs which fill up voids and sweeten what is bitter. The belief in immortality. The belief in the utility of sin: *etiam peccata*. The belief in the providential ordering of events—in short, the “consolations” which are ordinarily sought in religion.

Put more positively, the point, for Weil, is not to arrive at a fixed set of conceptions of life, death, and purpose, but rather to try to find a way of using concepts as opportunities for a certain kind of contemplation and encounter with reality. One can contemplate the truth of atheism and the truth of theism in different ways, because each may involve a genuine challenge to the settled beliefs that in different ways cushion one from real contact with the world. For Weil, contradictions can be experienced and contemplated in such a way that one is “drawn upwards,” but it is not so much the internal content of any particular contradiction that represents its value, but rather the nature of our confrontation with it—the “resistance” it offers to us (see the quotation from “Forms of the Implicit Love of God” in the following section for more on “resistance”). Hence the significance of the acceptance of death: we are finite mortals oriented toward the eternal; this is the experienced “impossibility” of our existence. By contemplating this, we experience the impossibility of desire, and in the process one may be fundamentally decentered, or made to “look up and wait.”

### The Pattern of Mystical Transformation

The question of what happens when one has “looked up, and waited” will be considered next, through a reading of Weil’s reflections on the
nature of spiritual transformation. As we will see, I believe that some of the questions that emerge from these reflections are very similar to those that were raised in relation to the aforementioned gospel sayings.

In her luminous short essay “Some Reflections on the Love of God” Weil articulates the heart of her understanding of spiritual awakening in terms of an acceptance of death:

It is not for man to seek, or even to believe in, God. He has only to refuse his love to everything which is not God. This refusal does not presuppose any belief. It is enough to recognize, what is obvious to any mind, that all the goods of this world, past, present and future, real or imaginary, are finite and limited and radically incapable of satisfying the desire which burns perpetually within us for an infinite and perfect good. All men know this, and more than once in their lives they recognize it for moment, but then they immediately begin deceiving themselves again so as not to know it any longer, because they feel that if they knew it they could not go on living. And their feeling is true, for that knowledge kills, but it inflicts a death which leads to a resurrection. But they do not foresee [foresee] that beforehand; all they foresee [foresee] is death; they must either choose truth and death or falsehood and life.29

It is noteworthy that although at this juncture Weil refers to a Platonic imperative—to “turn away with your whole soul from the things that pass”—she frames her allegiance to this imperative in Christian terms: death leads to resurrection, not immortality. Despite this, however, her discomfort with “resurrection” is very apparent, and as soon as she introduces this term, she immediately qualifies it: “they do not foresee that beforehand; all they foresee is death.” This qualification has to do with perspective; there is a difference between the “choice” she describes as it really is, and the choice as it is perceived by “all men” (sic). The “resurrection” that is spoken of here cannot be foreseen as resurrection, it can only be foreseen as death, and hence it is death that one must learn to accept; there is a strange sense in which spiritual life means learning to prefer death to life. However, this disciplining of one’s desire is not sufficient, and Weil goes on to say that spiritual “advance” is not gained through activity, but through patient, receptive waiting:

A little child who suddenly perceives that he has lost his mother in the street runs about, crying, in all directions; but he is wrong. If he had the sense and courage to stay where he is and wait, she would find him sooner. We must only wait and call out. Not call upon someone, while we still do not know if there is anyone; but cry out that we are hungry
and want bread. Whether we cry for a short time or a long time, in the
day we shall be fed, and then we shall not believe but we shall know that
there really is bread. What surer proof could one ask for than to have
eaten it? But before one has eaten, it is neither needful nor particularly
useful to believe in bread. What is essential is to know that one is hun-
gry; and this is not belief, it is absolutely certain knowledge which can
only be obscured by lies. All those who believe that food exists, or will
one day be produced in this world, are lying.

So we can now see that there may be a deeper reason for Weil’s reluc-
tance to concern herself with the idea of resurrection; not only is the
idea dangerously close to a crude and sensationalist supernaturalism,
it may also be an unhelpful diversion of attention. In Weil’s terms, it
is easy to imagine various kinds of bread, but immensely difficult to
face up to spiritual/metaphysical hunger, and so religious ideas that
encourage the imagination to anticipate fulfilment in particular forms
may be dangerous distractions, all too willingly embraced. More than
this, however, Weil explores the idea that when it comes to the desire
for the good, desire is its own satisfaction: when all the desire in the
soul has been detached from earthly goods, “on that day I shall pos-
sess the sovereign good…desiring in itself will be my good”). This
realization, in fact, is part of what the spiritual transformation that she
is concerned with consists in.

However, what Weil does not seem to take note of here is that
although it may not be particularly “useful” to believe in bread before
one has eaten, at the same time we might say that “hunger” is ines-
capably intentional; it is hard to make sense of what it would even
mean to know that one is hungry without some implicit conception
of satiety. At the very least, it would be hard to see how the metaphor
could do much work here if the distinction between the state of being
hungry and the state of being satisfied was to be lost altogether, just as
the synoptic saying relies on the desire for life, and the real difference
between losing and saving it. And so it seems as though the meta-
phor she uses—which, with all its gospel resonances carries much of
the force of the thought here—pulls in a different direction to some of
the intellectual tendencies evident elsewhere.

The logic of the first extract from “Some Reflections on the Love
of God” is repeated at several key passages in her notebooks, most
notably in the Marseilles notebook:

The world is a closed door. It is a barrier, and at the same time it is
the passage way. If we want only the absolute good, that is to say, if
we reject all the existing or possible, sensible, imaginary or conceivable good that is offered us by creatures as being insufficient; if we prefer to choose nothing at all rather than all that, then (with time), being turned toward that which we cannot possibly conceive, a revelation of it comes to us—the revelation that this nothingness is really the fullest possible fullness, the main-spring and principle of all reality. Then we can truthfully say that we have faith in God.34

In both cases the movement involves a painful acceptance, or endurance, but there is a small but important conceptual difference concerning the positive moment. This can be seen in comparison between the crucial phrases in each: in the essay, we read that there is a knowledge that kills, but that it “inflicts a death which leads to a resurrection”; in the notebooks we read that if we reject all conceivable goods, and wait, then a revelation comes, “the revelation that this nothingness is really the fullest possible fullness.” The difference seems to be between transformation, in which that which has died is resurrected in a transformed state (through the provision of ‘supernatural bread”), and a dramatic and liberating shift in perspective (in which nothingness is shown to have been—all along, presumably—fullness).

The beginning of “Some Reflections on the Love of God” can be seen as an exhortation for honesty concerning the difference between desire and fulfilment, or between hunger and satiety. The path to spiritual transformation is, according to Weil, remarkably simple: to admit the insatiable nature of the desire that “burns perpetually within,” and then to “wait.” Somehow, the honesty required to admit to this hunger, and the patience required to “wait” is rarer than one might expect (and here the fourth beatitude is clearly in the background). But the logic of the extract from the notebooks above seems to suggest that there is a perspective from which the difference between hunger and satiety disappears, insofar as “void” is shown to have been “the fullest possible fullness.” Weil seems overwhelmingly to favor the latter approach in her thought (in which the mystical moment is a shift in perspective, which dissolves certain distinctions), but my suggestion here is that there are good reasons to pay attention to the “traces” of the former (in which there is transformation, and the difference between hunger and bread is maintained).

A similar issue can be discerned in an entry that concerns time. For Weil, “time,” like death, is both a sign of our finitude and the root of sinful attempts to escape from our condition; this is most often explored in relation to periods of intense suffering, in which the
passage of time is felt as an inescapable curse. For Weil, when the time of suffering is accepted and loved as time, it opens out onto “eternity,” just as death accepted as death leads to life: “If one behaves as though dead, the Lord comes and brings life from on high... Total obedience to time obliges God to bestow eternity.” There is a strange dynamic here: abundance is glimpsed, or given, only once scarcity is accepted. But, again, it is not clear whether Weil has in mind something like an unveiling or dramatic shift in perspective, in which time is found to be eternity, just as emptiness was found to be fullness; or something more like a transformation, in which eternity overcomes the finitude of time. Forms of understanding based on either could be accused of “sweetening what is bitter” or providing false consolation: if one believes that one can, somehow, become reconciled with death and temporal finitude through a shift in perspective, one may thereby sweeten the bitterness; if one believes that suffering is a temporary trial and that heavenly relief awaits in a God-given future, one might never taste the bitterness in the first place. Weil’s tendency to resolve the ambiguity in the direction of the former raises the suspicion that at times in her own thought there is a tendency of resolving contradictions too hastily, rather than “waiting” with them.

In an excellent essay on Weil’s concept of “decreation,” J. P. Little briefly suggests a criticism of Weil that, in my view, deserves greater attention, and which I hope will shed some light on the issues we are concerned with here. As has already been mentioned, for Weil, creation is seen as an act of abdication, in which God consents to be less than everything; and in this sense, “decreation” is the process by which, through acceptance of our essential nullity, autonomous creatures imitate this abdication, by “refusing to be.” Little goes on to explore the role of this concept in Weil’s thought, with particular reference to her dualistic conception of the self, which consists of the autonomous ego that says “I” and the “uncreated,” eternal core. In passing she notes that there is a parallel between the metaphysics that Weil develops and her own judgment of the “desire for equilibrium”: “Our human response to God, decreation replying to creation, amounts to an almost necessary reciprocity, a symmetry indicative of Simone Weil’s need in this, as in many other areas of her thought, to restore a balance that has been disturbed by the assertion of the autonomous self.” The possibility is raised, then, that Weil may have provided the conceptual tools necessary to critique some of her own more extreme metaphysical speculations.

In my view, it seems as though the ambiguity between the two ways of understanding the mystical moments in Weil’s thought—perspective
and transformation—may actually be a fertile ambiguity, but very often Weil seems to resolve the ambiguity in one direction, as already discussed. In some respects it seems as though the effect of this is to restore a certain kind of balance: the truth of desire is that it is its own aim; the truth of our finitude and death is that this is our fulfilment; the truth of the loved one’s absence is their presence; the truth of our existence is its essential nullity. In short, all that seems to negate being, vitality, or relationality becomes a “draught of immortality” once faced and accepted.38 But perhaps the effect of this actually is to reduce the sense that to be human is to be essentially unfinished, and open. The gospel saying with which we began appears to maintain the sense that the “gain” of one’s life may lie ahead, even as it also suggests a complete upheaval of the difference between gain and loss. Weil’s work, it appears to me, is often animated by a similar tension, and yet Weil’s tendency is to tip the balance in favor of a mystical transformation of perspective, which can be rationally comprehended. Little suggest that Weil’s own metaphysics may be tainted by the search for equilibrium; my argument here is that at times she is guilty of resolving some of the most fertile ambiguities that her work expresses slightly too quickly, in search of purity.

Conclusion

The notebooks, short essays, and letters that contain this rich legacy are complicated and unfinished, and moreover, Weil herself is not unaware of some of the conflicts and tensions that emerge from them, and did not intend to provide a final schematic account of them. Nevertheless, the set of ideas with which I have been concerned appear frequently enough to be considered a central part of her thought, and one of her key concerns: to articulate the essential shape or pattern of mystical revaluation. In the brief discussion here, I have tried to show that there is a conceptual conflict apparent in the important passages that describe this pattern. Weil seems to have experimented with her own way of resolving this issue and others like it through two ideas: first, that some beliefs should be held “in secret” and are self-refuting as soon as they are known or held consciously (because loss is not really loss if it is known to really be gain);39 second, the idea that there are different “levels” of affirmation, meaning that some truths can be false if conceived at the wrong “level.”40 These ideas are deeply intriguing and profound in their own right. My suggestion is simply that the ambiguity may have been more important and more fundamental to Christian
thought, than Weil realized, and that this may have something to do with the meaning of the Resurrection; a subject that she devoted relatively little attention to, and seems to have dismissed rather too easily. A rare reflection from Weil’s “New York Notebook” that gestures in the direction I have in mind will have to serve as a final word:

The resurrection is Christ’s pardon to those who killed him, the evidence that in doing him the greatest possible harm they did him no harm. […] The joy of Easter is not the joy that comes after pain, like freedom after chains, repletion after hunger, or reunion after separation. It is the joy that soars above pain and perfects it. […] Pain is the contrary of joy; but joy is not the contrary of pain. 41

Notes

4. Weil, First and Last Notebooks, 213.
5. Weil, Notebooks, 494.
6. Mk. 8:36 (NRSV). See also variants in Mt. 10:39, 16:25; Lk. 9:24 and 17:33; plus Jn. 12:25.
7. The Lucan version of the beatitudes renders this problem more acutely: it is not simply the poor “in spirit” to whom the kingdom already belongs, but simply the poor; wealth, satiety, and laughter are signs that one has nothing good left to receive, that one has already received one’s reward.
8. See Phillipa Foot’s essay on Nietzsche’s “revaluation of values” on this simple but important point in Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 81–95.
12. Weil, First and Last Notebooks, 97–98.
15. Ibid., 15; Weil, Notebooks.
16. This point is consonant with James Alison’s description of resentment as a warding off of death, the attempt to reaffirm the value of one’s life over and against the threat of death. See “Theology among the Stones and Dust,” in Theology and Sexuality, 11 (1999): 91–114.
17. Weil, Gravity and Grace, 22.


21. See, e.g., Ibid., 175.

22. See ibid., 489; *First and Last Notebooks*, 308


26. This can be seen from a particularly interesting entry in the Marseilles notebook:

> The three conceptions, first that of annihilation in the sense understood by atheists, secondly that of reincarnation and purgatory, and thirdly that of paradise and hell—all three of which are indispensable for pondering on the subject of death—can very well be accepted as true and conceived of simultaneously if we bear in mind the fact that death lies at the point of intersection between time and eternity. They only seem incompatible to us because we cannot prevent ourselves from visualizing eternity as a duration.

> All three are necessary. Reincarnation and purgatory mask the truth that this life is unique, irreparable, the only one in which we can either be lost or saved. Paradise and hell mask the truth that salvation is solely the accompaniment of perfection, and damnation solely the accompaniment of betrayal, and that the soul which is imperfect, but nevertheless turned in the direction of good, is not susceptible of either the one or the other. The materialistic notion of annihilation shuts out the essential, primordial truth that the one and only need of the soul is salvation, and that the whole meaning of life lies in making preparation for the moment of death. The belief in immortality breaks up the pure bitterness and the reality itself of death, which remains for us the most precious gift bestowed by divine Providence. (Weil, *Notebooks*, 467–468)

Her point suggests that she had begun to view materialistic atheism as—at least potentially—as “evasive” as certain forms of theism, despite the fact that she vows that one cannot be materialist enough when contemplating human society.

29. Weil, *Gateway to God*, 85. See the parallel passage in the *Notebooks*, 492: “If we want only the absolute good, that is to say, if we reject all the existing or possible, sensible, imaginary or conceivable good that is offered us by creatures as being insufficient; if we prefer to choose nothing at all rather than all that, then, (with time), being turned toward that which we cannot possible conceive, a revelation of it comes to us—the revelation that this nothingness is really the fullest possible fullness, the main-spring and principle of all reality. Then we can truthfully say that we have faith in God.”
32. I am indebted, here, to Rush Rhees’s discussion of Weil’s use of the term “obedience” to describe the necessities of the natural world. Although the problem he raises is thematically different, the criticism has a similar—Wittgensteinian—form to the one I put forward here. See Rush Rhees, *Discussions of Simone Weil*, ed. D. Z. Philips, ass. Mario von der Ruhr (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 57–58.
33. Weil’s reflections on “moral faith,” which seem to propose something similar to Kant’s “postulates” in *The Critique of Practical Reason*, are also relevant here. Weil argues that anyone who believes that the desire for the good is never in vain, regardless of how they might consider themselves, has faith. See, e.g., Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 138.
34. Weil, *Notebooks*, 492
35. Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 110.
36. See J. P. Little, “Simone Weil’s Concept of Decreation,” in *Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Culture, Readings towards a Divine Humanity*, 27.
40. Ibid., 179.
41. Ibid., 69.
Thoreau’s Religious Response to Death

Robert Michael Ruehl

Beginnings

In his *Discourses*, Epictetus writes, “When death appears to be an evil, we must have ready at hand the argument that it is our duty to avoid evils, and that death is an inevitable thing. For what can I do? Where shall I go to escape it?”¹ This quote provides a suitable starting point by emphasizing the unpreventable and the avoidable. That which causes humans avoidable harm is “evil,” and we should elude it the best we can. The unpreventable aspects of life can never be evil; death is one of those inevitable features, so we need to accept it with equanimity. With a similar Stoic disposition, Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) accepts death’s unavoidability while seeking to imagine the best way to live a quality life in response.² He assumes neither an overly optimistic nor a pessimistic view of human finitude; instead, Thoreau reassesses death as a sad occasion while realizing that it enables new life to develop. Loss of life is part of a natural cycle including birth, maturation, and old age; yet Thoreau sees death as a possible moment for inspiration that can stimulate us to a new, better self based on responsibility and respect for the deceased. This new, better self manifests the deceased’s life by weaving the loved one’s traces into the fabric of its burgeoning present and future. In this way, Thoreau provides an orientation supporting those left behind by focusing on deliberately reconstructing a quality life with the dead in mind.

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross helps to reposition death’s inevitability and the grieving process composed of a complex, uncertain movement
through “five stages of grief”: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Absent from this list, however, is an intentional reappraisal of life and a fresh start emerging from loss, grief, and attempts to cultivate a flourishing life. If acceptance is possibly the highest stage—with likely lapses into previous phases—this seems too passive, yet Thoreau offers something fresh by not only accepting death but by also translating it into a qualitatively better life where the memory, energy, and presence of the deceased continue to positively enhance the present. Through resolute acts committed to the deceased, acts I call “preservative care,” Thoreau transforms loss into something positive, what he calls “second growth.” One’s life becomes a way to honor those no longer physically present; their traces become an inspirational catalyst to higher, deliberate living, and it is through acting on that motivation that life honors the dead and, unexpectedly, honors the divinity permeating all creation. Thoreau does not deny death’s heartrending consequences, yet loss provides new opportunities. Through preservative care and second growth, he alters our religious perspectives on diminishment and loss of life in his first book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849).

To describe how Thoreau engages loss of life on several levels, this essay will develop in the following way. First, it will explain Thoreau’s familiarity with death; through the loss of loved ones and family members, especially his brother John, Thoreau experienced death frequently and intensely. The second section will describe Thoreau’s awareness of another type of death, that is, the diminishment of life in Native American communities and the environment because of European colonization, industrialization, and governmental practices of subjugation. Thoreau remained quite sensitive to the diminishment of life in these areas until his death when in his final words he spoke of *A Week*, Native Americans, and moose. The third section concentrates on Thoreau’s unorthodox interpretation of religion based on natural processes that allows him to envision new growth emerging because of death. Loss of life makes room for new life or second growth. The fourth section explains how preservative care fits into this religious understanding. Preservative care is an ethical, religious posture toward life that urges a person to strive to be a supportive part of the creative processes of nature, so second growth can emerge and flourish.

Through this orientation of preservative care, death, dying, religion, and mysticism merge. What readers encounter in *A Week* is a religious understanding of death and dying based on divine processes sustaining nature and all life in which life and death are interconnected and
integral elements of a balanced cosmos. It is through Thoreau’s coming to understand death as a possible inspiriting moment—an intimate encounter with divine processes in which death and life are seen as inseparable—that we encounter Thoreau’s mysticism. Through the loss of a loved one or someone cared for deeply, the person left behind becomes second growth, that divine element helping to sustain the much grander, divine, natural processes integral to all existence.

Thoreau’s Coming to Terms with Death

On October 22, 1837, Thoreau began keeping a journal; two days later, he turned to the topic of death: “Every part of nature teaches that the passing away of one life is the making room for another. The oak dies down to the ground, leaving within its rind a rich virgin mould, which will impart a vigorous life to an infant forest.” This process of dying and the emergence of new life is “second growth”: “So this constant abrasion and decay makes the soil of my future growth . . . [and] will constitute my second growth.” This naturalistic description orients another entry on March 14, 1842: “The sad memory of departed friends is soon incrusted over with sublime & pleasing thoughts—as their monuments are overgrown with moss. Nature doth thus kindly heal every wound.” Death sustains new life, and fresh growth is part of a healing process associated with the organic activities of the natural world. Instead of seeing death as something unwanted and something to be feared, Thoreau redirects readers toward the inevitability, naturalness, and importance of death for sustained health in this world.

These entries seem to be theorizations from a detached, naturalistic perspective imposing an environmental framework on human mortality. On closer examination, this is not the case as Thoreau had encountered death on several occasions before and after these entries. When he was six weeks old, for example, his uncle died; Thoreau’s parents named him David to honor his deceased uncle, a constant reminder of a dead forebear. His grandmother died in 1830, and his sister would die shortly after the publication of A Week in 1849. By 1859, Thoreau had lost his father. Most importantly, however, the second entry above came shortly after the loss of his brother John and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s five-year-old son, Waldo. In 1842, John died from tetanus, and Waldo died from scarlet fever within two weeks of John’s death. Thoreau had lived with the Emersons for almost a year by this time and knew Waldo well, and John was Thoreau’s best friend. David Robinson’s description makes that journal entry more poignant.
Although Thoreau seemed at first to react calmly to John’s death, he was actually repressing powerful emotions; he began to sink into a listlessness and depression, and eleven days later he too began to exhibit the symptoms of tetanus, or lockjaw, though he had not in fact contracted the disease. One can see in Thoreau’s terrifying psychosomatic reenactment of John’s symptoms a desperate reaching out in sympathy to a brother he could not help, and who had died in his arms…Thoreau’s symptoms became so severe that his doctors and family were concerned that he would die, and even after he began to recover, he remained bedridden for a month, and was seriously weakened well into the spring…He had lost, in John, the closest human relationship that he would ever have.11

Thoreau wrote the second journal entry almost two months after his brother’s death, yet we have to reevaluate this close relationship with death because Thoreau lived with the likelihood of his own demise. He probably contracted tuberculosis during his teenage years at Harvard College,12 and poor health flared up periodically, leaving him bedridden for extended periods.13 Finally, at the age of forty-four, he succumbed to tuberculosis after approximately a year of fighting it. Instead of interpreting Thoreau’s entries as an attempt to distance himself from death, it is more accurate to understand them as attempts to come to terms with death, allowing him to engage human finitude in a proactive way.

Encounters with death should reorient interpretations of Thoreau. Authors remind readers of his naturalistic interests, solitary pursuits, strong individualism, and great literary accomplishments, such as Walden and “Civil Disobedience.” To a certain extent, these emphases are reductive and obscure his struggles to live a quality life. Thoreau had to come to terms with the dissolution of close friendships, the loss of loved ones, and the disappointingly cold receptions to his early writings. These and other struggles aided Richard Bridgman in addressing Thoreau’s pessimistic side. In Dark Thoreau, Bridgman follows a thread of negativity guiding Thoreau’s outlook as he ultimately interprets good moments through a depressive lens.14 While Bridgman’s work is helpful because it reminds readers of the person behind the intellectual products that have shaped American culture and literature, its focus hides as much as it reveals. It would be more accurate to reinterpret Thoreau as focusing on complex processes inherent in existence, human life, and human flourishing. He was not an either-or thinker, but accustomed to holding the “negative” and “positive” together comfortably. Materially and conceptually, Thoreau believed life depends on death and vice versa, but Thoreau also wanted to
comprehend the weaving and disentangling processes constituting emergence, becoming, and dissolution in human and nonhuman existence. Faithful to this awareness, Thoreau sought to educate readers about these processes, aiding them to live fuller lives whether in crippling situations or in successful moments. This respect for death was an affirmation of life allowing him to transform death into second growth and to improve life after loss through the interpretive lens of preservative care.

Thoreau’s A Week and Death’s Presence

Thoreau wrote the first two drafts of *A Week* while residing at Walden Pond, which was not a time of laziness as his work ethic was austere; he carried this rigorousness into his daily practices at the water’s edge and labored almost daily on the composition of his first book and other writings. Thoreau wrote *A Week* with full consciousness of the death that surrounded him personally and that was woven into New England’s history. While he affirmed the optimistic outlook of Emerson, Thoreau tempered it by focusing on the tension between life and death. *A Week* addresses three important encounters with diminishment and loss of life: the death of his brother, Native Americans, and the natural world. Each brought Thoreau face to face with death, and *A Week* forces readers to realize death’s pervasion of life.

In 1839, Thoreau and John took a two-week boat and hiking trip from Concord, Massachusetts, to the summit of the White Mountains and back, and they built their own boat and grew melons and potatoes to nourish them on the way. Thoreau would write about their movement upstream and their thoughts in a way that merged his identity with John’s: “We thus worked our way up this river, gradually adjusting our thoughts to novelties, beholding from its placid bosom a new nature and new works of men, and as it were with increasing confidence, finding nature still habitable, genial, and propitious to us; not following any beaten path, but the windings of the river, as ever the nearest way for us.” Throughout much of the text, the brothers are largely indistinguishable from one another through the first person plural pronouns “we” and “us.” It took Thoreau ten years to complete *A Week*, and it was a memorial to his dead brother, as Richard Lebeaux rightly claims: “Imbued now with an urgent sense of mission, he started to work on a book that would be not only a richly detailed and allusive re-creation primarily of the week he had spent with John on the rivers but also a worthy memorial to the elder brother he had loved and lost.”
A Week allowed Thoreau to honor John’s memory by giving new life to their trip and their relationship. Like ancient bards, Thoreau summons a Muse. The opening page begins with an epigraph: “Be thou my Muse, my Brother—.” While easily interpretable as a lament, A Week is more than this because it cultivates the memory of a special relationship and is a way of honoring it, a way of being responsive to it, and a way of being responsible to it, while allowing the trip and the narrative to become inspirational emblems for readers. A Week allows John’s life and death to travel into distant times and places with the hope of inspiring others to live bolder lives as John had inspired Thoreau. This is clearest in a passage adapted from the journal entry presented in the second section above: “Even the death of Friends will inspire us as much as their lives. They will leave consolation to the mourners, as the rich leave money to defray the expenses of their funeral, and their memories will be incrusted over with sublime and pleasing thoughts, as monuments of other men are overgrown with moss; for our Friends have no place in the graveyard.” The dead live on and influence those left behind.

Thoreau moves beyond his brother’s death to the displacement and diminishment of Indigenous communities. In the opening paragraph of A Week, the following lines appear about the conflicts between Native Americans in the northeast and Puritan settlers:

The Musketaquid, or Grass-ground River, though probably as old as the Nile or Euphrates, did not begin to have a place in civilized history, until the fame of its grassy meadows and its fish attracted settlers out of England in 1635, when it received the other but kindred name of Concord from the first plantation on its banks...To an extinct race it was grass-ground where they hunted and fished.

The final sentence refers to “extinction” and needs to be explained, for Thoreau encountered Indigenous peoples; he had engaged living members of Indigenous communities in New England, so he means something else.

While he was aware of genocidal actions against Indigenous peoples, such as the Pequot War that culminated with a declaration and sanctioned actions to force the extinction of Pequots, Thoreau is addressing the diminishment of their ways of life as much as he is emphasizing attempted genocide. Their original hunting and fishing grounds were seized and closed off to them, and this coincided with linguistic colonizing acts such as renaming rivers and lands. This was part of the
“civilizing” processes to domesticate the untamed wilderness; to tame it meant to displace, eliminate, or domesticate those living respectfully with the natural world. This theme of multilevel violence toward Indigenous peoples adds texture to each chapter of *A Week*. In “Sunday,” Thoreau addresses oppressive religion in New England. Reflecting on the town of Billerica, he writes the following words:

Some spring the white man came, built him a house, and made a clearing here, letting in the sun, dried up a farm, piled up the old gray stones in fences, cut down the pines around his dwelling, planted orchard seeds brought from the old country, and persuaded the civil apple tree to blossom next to the wild pine and the juniper, shedding its perfume in the wilderness...He rudely bridged the stream, and drove his team afield into the river meadows, cut the wild grass, and laid bare the homes of beaver, otter, muskrat, and with the whetting of his scythe scared off the deer and bear...And thus he plants a town. The white man’s mullein soon reigned in Indian corn-fields, and sweet scented English grasses clothed the new soil. Where, then, could the Red Man set his foot?

With indifference to those in the region, settlers mark their presence through destruction and displacement, refashioning the wilderness by cutting down trees, clearing the forest floor, and overtaking Indigenous fields of corn with nonindigenous plant species. Native Americans had lived in the Concord region since approximately 6,000 BCE, doing so without destroying the region and terrifying wildlife; they maintained harmonious relationships with local ecosystems. The process of colonization indicates how indigenous plants, animals, and people became irrelevant as settlers transplanted a “new England” in the region. Cultural deaths existed alongside physical suffering and biological death for Indigenous peoples in the region.

In “Monday,” Thoreau addresses the desire for Indigenous submission with Captain Lovewell’s actions in 1725. Lovewell was going out to kill Abnaki Indians, but he was warned about possible ambuscades. Instead of trepidation, Lovewell offers a manly display of indignation, stating that he would not be deterred. Turning to his side “and bending down a small elm beside which he was standing into a bow,” he declared, “that he would treat the Indians in the same way.” Thoreau’s passage optimistically indicates, however, that the elm tree lived on and was still standing in Nashua years after Lovewell’s actions. This New England spirit against Indigenous peoples presents an ambiguous image of death for readers. Wars, displacement, and cultural destruction are part of a process of degradation Thoreau
terms “extermination” as Indigenous eviction from hunting, fishing, and spiritual lands were an intimate part of Native American identity. While the body count belies literal extinction, another terrible death is found in self-estrangement, isolation, normlessness, and the diminishment of Indigenous life and culture.26

In addition to reverencing Native American life and cultures, Thoreau esteemed the natural world. When he surveyed the local New England countryside and journeyed on the waters of the Concord and Merrimack rivers, however, he recognized a destructive force reshaping the region. Thoreau emphasizes local conflicts between farmers and mill owners. As the establishment of textile factories increased, dams were necessary for hydraulic power. “Its farmers tell me that thousands of acres are flooded now, since the dams have been erected, where they remember to have seen the white honeysuckle or clover growing once, and they could go dry with shoes only in summer. Now there is nothing but blue-joint and sedge and cutgrass there, standing in water all the year round.”27 The mills and dams had elevated water levels and caused the fields to flood, but the farmers were to blame too; they had cleared many of the surrounding hills leaving them bereft of trees, increasing both runoff into the rivers and water levels. Farming and factory activities, then, jointly altered the ecosystems around and in the rivers.

Recognizing the inherent dignity of the natural world, Thoreau disliked the destruction he encountered while traveling on the rivers. He knew what anthropogenic activities were doing to wildlife in and around the rivers; rising water levels had altered the landscape’s scenery. The elevated water had submerged waterfalls, and the restricted flows were negatively affecting fish migration.28 No longer were the fish able to swim and spawn as they once had. Human activities and interests superseded the needs of the fish, and some were facing extinction.

Shad are still taken in the basin of Concord River at Lowell... Still patiently, almost pathetically, with instinct not to be discouraged, not to be reasoned with, revisiting their old haunts, as if their stern fates would relent, and still met by the Corporation with its dam. Poor shad! where is thy redress?... Armed with no sword, no electric shock, but mere Shad, armed only with innocence and a just cause... I for one am with thee, and who knows what may avail a crow-bar against that Billerica dam?... Who hears the fishes when they cry?29

Environmental indifference bothered Thoreau so much that he hints at ecological sabotage to improve the quality of life for the fish. Vegetation
and wildlife in the region, then, were rapidly decreasing because of the alterations made by European settlers. While he could not turn away from the death of his brother and the sufferings of Native Americans, Thoreau also could not turn away from the struggling ecosystems, vegetation, and wildlife in the region. As with Indigenous peoples, vegetation and wildlife were being displaced and destroyed in the interests of one group.

**Thoreau’s Unconventional Religious Sensibility**

*A Week*’s religious sensibility diverged from New England’s religiosity. While orthodox Calvinists and orthodox Unitarians held firm to their emphases on Christian supremacy, Thoreau turned away from institutional Christianity, immersing himself in the natural world and immediate encounters with the divine. What he was experiencing was not a personal God separated from the created realm, but a divine force within creation and part of nature. In fact, Thoreau breaks free from Emerson’s view of nature as a sign pointing to God as Thoreau envisions nature as divine itself. He is not encountering something static, but a creative process still working from the past to the present and into the future. It remains young, vigorous, and in the common aspects of the world: “As yesterday and the historical ages are past, as the work of to-day is present, so some flitting perspectives, and demi-experiences of the life that is in nature are, in time, veritably future, or rather outside to time, perennial, young, divine, in the wind and rain which never die.” To satisfy his penchant for nonconformity, Thoreau gives this divine aspect an unfettered name. He calls it the “Unnamed,” which has five qualities: possibility, buoyancy, freedom, flexibility, and variety. The entirety of *A Week* emphasizes these qualities, displaying how religion is afloat on dynamic processes of creation and recreation.

These dynamic processes are not separate from us. As with the processes of nature, humans are actively engaged in them, helping to cultivate them, and to keep them healthy. During Thoreau’s lifetime, and in elaborating agreements between Indigenous peoples and Euro-Americans, the phrase to describe a long period of time or even eternity was “as long as the grass grows and the water runs”; this phrase discloses motion and growth. As water continues to flow, it will nurture the grasses and other living beings. To exist in the created order is to exist among continuous activities of regeneration and recreation. Oren Lyons, faith keeper of the Onondaga Nation, speaks of this as
the Law of the Seed or the Law of Regeneration.\textsuperscript{34} Within existence is a process of creation that continuously unfolds, and humanity is part of it with lifestyles related to these regenerative processes in unique ways, sometimes in healthy or unhealthy ways. No aspect of creation is separate from these eternal creative activities.

Thoreau offers two passages clearly depicting these endless processes. The first is his appreciation of living on an island with its alterations:

\textit{The shifting islands! Who would not be willing that his house should be undermined by such a foe! The inhabitant of an island can tell what currents formed the land which he cultivates; and his earth is still being created and destroyed. There before his door, perchance, still empties the stream which brought down the material of his farm ages before, and is still bringing it down or washing it away,—the graceful, gentle robber!\textsuperscript{35}}

He is describing how all foundations are in motion. Something emerges in an opening, takes a more lasting shape, and then begins the process of dissolving. This shifting activity allows for the endless renewal of the world.

A much later passage makes this clearer emphasizing the flowing quality of existence in things we thought were much more solid.

\textit{All things seemed with us to flow; the shore itself, and the distant cliffs, were dissolved by the undiluted air. The hardest material seemed to obey the same law with the most fluid, and so indeed in the long run it does. Trees were but rivers of sap and woody fibre, flowing from the atmosphere, and emptying into the earth by their trunks, as their roots flowed upward to the surface. And in the heavens there were rivers of stars, and milky-ways, already beginning to gleam and ripple over our heads. There were rivers of rock on the surface of the earth, and rivers of ore in its bowels, and our thoughts flowed and circulated, and this portion of time was but the current of the hour.\textsuperscript{36}}

Thoreau allows everything to be in motion: thoughts, clouds, the sap in trees, and even the apparent solid ground beneath our feet. This reveals courage through his comfortableness with the streaming nature of reality. We cannot encounter the same reality twice because its alterations change relations that can never be replicated. One further consequence is how Thoreau associates divinity with nature and natural processes, and this means God or that supra-human component we call “God”
is in flux. The theological ground of all being is actually more like a coursing river with surmountable banks that meanders through the countryside like a lethargic snake coming out of hibernation.37

Thoreau values the Unnamed and its qualities, so by naming it with what amounts to a non-name, the divine cannot be compartmentalized or co-opted by any one religion, culture, or group. Possibility discloses the likelihood of unforeseen realities to emerge. Buoyancy suggests the ability to rise above subjugating activities. Freedom implies liberation from constraints. Flexibility implies a lack of rigidity when encountering new circumstances, and variety implies a lack of homogeneity and a preference for diversity that challenges narrow identities and narcissistic self-interest. Thoreau elaborates a “theology of flows,” then, as the Unnamed’s attributes and activities continuously allow existence to flow into fresh configurations, transforming old situations into new ones.38 Old growth leads to new, and prevailing lifestyles alter with varying degrees of intensity into new ones. Thoreau’s religious sensibility reorients readers toward the healthy nature of change and its necessity for life’s continuation, and each person is responsible for nurturing and preserving these flows instead of trying to constrain them.

Preservative Care, Diminishment, and Death

Edward F. Mooney describes “preservative care” with words such as “passion,” “plenitude,” “imagination,” “intimacy,” and “love.” This may be care for a garden or a child: nurturing it, appreciating it, finding oneself through the words preserving it. Preservative care is linked to “evocations of wonder,” the “saving impulses of love,” “new experiential frames,” fresh “moments of vision,” and experiential wisdom that is “not propositional.”39 He writes, “Attaining such preservative care, letting oneself be immersed in those arts of reception and listening it presupposes, does not happen once for all, and is as mysterious and method-defying as any adventure of love is. It’s hard to be taught to fall in love. Falling in and out of love is hardly something we accomplish by good study habits or research skills or critical analysis.”40 Preservative care is a posture toward the world allowing for intimate encounters with otherness—a love for otherness—a posture that is oriented toward honoring the singularity and vibrancy of all living things, and even lifeless things (rock gardens and rivers and the sunset one paints, thus carefully preserving it). Through this receptive posture, the person affirms qualities in these relationships with life and non-life; the presence of such concern helps orient us in more sympathetic,
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compassionate, and responsive ways toward all existence. To place him and his response to death within this framework, and in the language of Edith Wyschogrod, Thoreau exhibits “a double passion, an eros for the past and an ardor for the others in whose name there is a felt urgency to speak,” and his preservative care undermines the “finality of death” by imbuing it with new life or second growth.41

Thoreau is dislodged from the comfortableness of existence; he is haunted by the reminders of those he loves. Living in Concord, Thoreau could not venture outside without reminders of the dead and the dying. Stepping beyond the threshold of his family’s door onto their property, Thoreau would have encountered the common environs in which he and John cultivated their melons and potatoes. Throughout the countryside, Thoreau did not encounter lush forests and thriving trees; by the time of his adult life, most of the trees had been cut to the ground—leaving fields of decaying stumps. He would have encountered the traces of his Native American brothers and sisters too. Not only did Thoreau find arrowheads on his jaunts across the New England countryside, but he also found traces of their former places of residence, such as fire pits, stone fragments in the dirt where they had made arrowheads, and their former hunting and fishing grounds. Instead of closing himself off to these tragic reminders constituting human life since Europeans settled the “New World,” Thoreau allowed himself to be receptive to these traces, attuning his senses to the world around him and its vibrant history.

This receptivity or attunement of one’s senses and consciousness to the otherness of the suffering and the apparent absence of the dead is a form of dissident responsiveness. The situation of human life within Western group settings often generates a dysfunctionality that effaces otherness; it is a process of keeping things and persons in their places. It is the logic of ordering worlds and forming rigid hierarchies. Thoreau resists this dysfunctional way of structuring the world through his dissident responsiveness. The common logic or “common sense” is to say that his brother is dead; the physical body is gone and decaying in the ground, and his life has passed. Concerning Native Americans, they are a diminished form of humanity akin to wild beasts. They are uncivilized and, therefore, have no rightful place within the American political structure. They are the excremental other necessary for the establishment of the American identity. Finally, and intimately connected with the devaluation of Indigenous peoples, nature is present for human needs and to be mastered for productive ends: control the water for textile production, or deforest the countryside to provide timber
for the railroad and shipbuilding. Thoreau’s cultivated receptivity for the dead and suffering escaped these constraining practices and offered him a new form of wisdom, which he called “uncommon sense.”

Uncommon sense provides new experiential frames and fresh moments of vision that unravel the logical propositions giving the appearance of certitude, longevity, and justness to the hierarchical orderings and behaviors constituting American life. Uncommon sense is not only an important aspect of the good life for Thoreau, but it is wisdom—a liberating intelligence freed from narrowminded views and common devaluations.

I perceive in the common train of my thoughts a natural and uninterrupted sequence, each implying the next, or, if interruption occurs it is occasioned by a new object being presented to my senses. But a steep, and sudden, and by these means unaccountable transition, is that from a comparatively narrow and partial, what is called common sense view of things, to an infinitely expanded and liberating one, from seeing things as men describe them, to seeing them as men cannot describe them. This implies a sense which is not common, but rare in the wisest man’s experience; which is sensible or sentient of more than common.42

In this movement from the common to the uncommon, Thoreau finds wisdom; it is rare and only exists in the wisest of people. Supporting this, he also writes, “What is called common sense is excellent in its department, and as invaluable as the virtue of conformity in the army and navy,—for there must be subordination,—but uncommon sense, that sense which is common only to the wisest, is as much more excellent as it is more rare.”43

Against falling into a pattern of thinking where that which is absent through death or diminishment is no longer important or that which is absent from the dominant discourse has no relevance, Thoreau reminds readers how important it is to remember that every logic organizing a culture’s thought processes and perceptions is limited and necessarily exclusionary. Instead of coldness, Thoreau offers warmth toward the dead and the diminished. Opposing marginalizing practices, Thoreau chooses affirmation and inclusion. Unlike the dominant trend fostering indifference, Thoreau actively pursues remembrance to honor the dead and the diminished, which allows him to potentially improve the lives of others in the present through the deceased’s examples of noble living. The finality of death and the processes of diminishment become impotent through Thoreau’s intimate encounters with otherness and empathetic responsiveness.
A short passage from Søren Kierkegaard can help bring this section to a close. He is concerned with the inability of the dead to respond to works of love. He writes, “among the works of love, let us not forget this one, let us not forget to consider: the work of love in recollecting one who is dead.” Kierkegaard then writes, “The work of love in recollecting one who is dead is a work of the most unselfish love.” This love is behind Thoreau’s preservative care for John, Native Americans, and the natural world. He took ten years to write and rewrite A Week. This was not an action intended to bring fame; while he would have enjoyed recognition, Thoreau maintained a rigid writing life despite his constant failures. He wrote because he found it intrinsically valuable, and he composed A Week for the same reason. Thoreau found it an intrinsically valuable act to honor those he loved. Preservative care, then, is an unselfish act of love without any expectation of repayment. As found in A Week, preservative care honors those gone or diminished in order to share their gifts with the larger world. It was not that Thoreau had to convince himself of their intrinsic value. He wanted to persuade others, so they could have a revolution in their values, outlooks, and actions that would bring more quality to their lives. A Week as a text of preservative care, then, is the most unselfish act of love as Thoreau used his gifts to honor the gifts of the diminished and departed, so he could improve the gifts of those still living. This is how second growth comes from diminishment and death, transforming death into new life. This is also a religious activity where the Unnamed and its ceaseless processes of flux, transformation, and renewal are honored, which means that preservative care is a religious activity where honoring the dead is an act in harmony with the divine forces sustaining and recreating all existence.

Endings

Thoreau encountered death on several fronts. There was the death of his brother and Emerson’s son, Waldo. This form of loss, however, is different from the maltreatment of Indigenous peoples and the natural environment. The former can be framed as tragic deaths resulting from unforeseen circumstances and normal biological responses to pathogens, but the maltreatment of Native Americans and the natural environment includes the willful, systemic destruction and extermination of both human and nonhuman life. This means the latter have an ethico-political element emerging from the use of domination and oppression. It would be easy to imagine Thoreau’s disgust and his
possible advocacy of *lex talionis*, or the use of retaliation in an eye-for-an-eye fashion. Despite his abhorrence for the atrocities constituting American history and identity, *A Week* resists this approach and discerns the ambiguous nature of tragedy, loss, and injustice.

This double meaning is clear in the Hannah Dustan story in the “Thursday” chapter of *A Week*. This story addresses an invasion of Dustan’s town by Abnakis. Entering the town and killing many of the inhabitants, they take Dustan prisoner. In doing so, the captors kill her two-week-old child by smashing its head against an apple tree. They not only have Dustan as a captive, but there are two others with her. The Abnakis take them up the Merrimack River; they intend to make them run the gauntlet, so they can incorporate the captives into their community, replenishing their numbers due to the loss of life from wars and disease. On their way north, Dustan organizes an ambush in the middle of the night. The three kill ten Abnakis: two adult men, two adult women, and six children. Dustan takes their scalps, and the three escapees move as quickly as they can down the river in the cold spring weather. In his description, Thoreau reframes Cotton Mathers’s narrative of the event. Thoreau focuses on their escape and how they feel alienated from nature; the escapees are in a howling wilderness, reminiscent of biblical language relating to the years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness.

The important part of the story is an odd passage Thoreau uses to end the narrative. It is ambiguous and points to danger and possibility:

> According to the historian, they escaped as by a miracle all roving bands of Indians, and reached their homes in safety, with their trophies, for which the General Court paid them fifty pounds. The family of Hannah Dustan all assembled alive once more, except the infant whose brains were dashed out against the apple-tree, and there have been many who in later times have lived to say that they had eaten of the fruit of that apple-tree.

The two possible meanings are these. First, Thoreau’s contemporary readers would have thought about the forbidden fruit of Genesis; the apple tree harbors a level of danger. In this case, the danger is the perpetuation of murder, wars, and unhealthy hostilities. To continue to eat the fruit from that event means that people continue to be nourished by past violence. The cycles of killing are still nourishing the people of New England. The second possible meaning offers a more positive outlook. To imagine the young infant killed on that day and his blood
seeping into the ground and any of his material remains decaying to add nutrients to the soil, the reader can begin to think differently about what it could imply to eat from the tree. It is possible to read this image as nature transforming anthropogenic violence into something that nourishes future generations. That tree is still standing, and it is still bearing fruit or second growth to sustain people in the present. Thoreau is posing a serious challenge to readers as he confronts them with this dual image. To what extent are we still living and nurtured by past violence? To what extent has that violence been changed and actively transformed into something nurturing and peaceful?

As the apple tree stands in this ambiguous position, so do the loved ones left behind. They can be nourished by the finitude of the deceased person and the melancholia felt after an important person is lost, or they can take in that life and memory to bear new fruit because of that person’s continuing presence and influence. This is why Thoreau points to the natural phenomenon of second growth. The absence of the loved one makes room for a new type of life, a life nourished by the gifts of the deceased. The goal of preservative care is nothing more than cultivating the right receptive attitude and the right life to honor those gifts and the memories in order to produce something new and qualitatively better. This is how Thoreau instructs us to care for our ancestors and those we have lost; it is an active remembering process woven into our daily existence, thoughts, and speech. The fruits of that life can nourish others and inspire them to live differently. This production of new fruits to enliven others is also a religious act. In doing so, the person reveals and honors the five qualities of the Unnamed: possibility, buoyancy, freedom, flexibility, and variety. This life of deliberate action and respect for the deceased can inspire people to see new possibilities, to rise above the trivialities of consensus, to live more freely and openly, to encounter new challenges with openness and a lack of rigidity, and to appreciate the diversity that constitutes existence.

Thoreau does not suppress the presence of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance after losing somebody, but he did not want life to remain diminished, unsatisfactory, and disenchanted. Instead, he used his many losses to qualitatively transform his life for the better. No longer is death about being suffocated in despair or about turning away from the possibilities of life. Quite the contrary, death allows us to support the Unnamed, so we can exhibit its qualities in our life and inspire others to the same end. Death places a demand on the living, but the demand is to live more fully. As he had wondered how a person could die who had not fully lived, Thoreau translated death into
an inspirational act that would allow us to die after a life lived well.\textsuperscript{49} We need death to remind us how to be our next best self, which—in Thoreau’s eyes—is a fully religious act. Self-cultivation and deliberate living reattach people to the vibrancy and vigor of the Unnamed.

Notes

8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 372
13. This is clearest with the last years of his life. See Richardson, \textit{Henry Thoreau}, 385–389.
15. Raymond William Adams, “The Bibliographical History of Thoreau’s \textit{A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers},” \textit{Bibliographical Society of America


19. Ibid., 286.

20. Ibid., 5.


32. Ibid., 136. For more on the Unnamed and its significance for Thoreau, see Phyllida Anne Kent, “A Study of the Structure of Thoreau’s *Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*” (Master’s Thesis, Carleton University, 1968).


35. Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, 244.
36. Ibid., 331.
37. Ibid., 132.
40. Ibid., 167.
43. Ibid., 387.
49. I am thinking here of Thoreau’s passage in *Walden*. “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.” Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 90–91.

**Works Cited**


You create your own reality. Such a compelling statement might appear to derive directly from Transcendentalism, the self-reliant, idealist religious movement championed by Ralph Waldo Emerson early in the nineteenth century; or, its origin could lie in the pragmatist tradition advocated by William James. Instead, the popular cliché “you create your own reality” was coined by the disembodied spirit or “energy essence personality” named “Seth” who was channeled through the mediumship of Jane Roberts (Seth/Jane) during the years 1963–1984. ¹ It was during these years that Roberts, along with her husband Robert Butts, authored thirty-eight Seth/Jane related books concerned with the nature of reality, time and space, death, reincarnation, and spiritual development.² Roberts’s first book The Seth Material (1963), where Seth/Jane first tells us that we create our reality, launched what can be considered a modern mystical trend within contemporary expressions of metaphysical or New Age spirituality.³ New Age spirituality includes many strata of belief and practice that draw from a variety of religious traditions, but often privileges self-transformation and social reform through healing as well as access to esoteric knowledge through channeled teachers, ascended masters, meditation, visualization, and dream work.⁴ The Seth Material includes each of these elements and incorporates them into a systematic philosophy that I term the “Seth Paradigm.”

Introduction
The Seth Paradigm encompasses cosmology, ontology, epistemology, psychology, and a thanatology that offers a sophisticated approach to death and reincarnation. The Seth Paradigm’s systematic philosophy overcomes the mystical divide between the self (personality) and the divine (All-That-Is) by proposing that no true divide ever existed. The individual identity is both retained and in union with the divine simultaneously. Given the complexity and breadth of the Seth Material in its entirety, the goal of this chapter is threefold. In this chapter, I will: (1) introduce readers to Jane Roberts and the Seth Material; (2) identify the salient aspects of the Seth Paradigm’s understanding of the nature of self, reality, deity, death, reincarnation, and the divine; and (3) situate Roberts work within the web of American New Age ideas beginning with nineteenth-century antecedents and ending with twenty-first-century cultural iterations.

Channeled Material: “The Seth Personality”

Naturally, the question of what “Seth” is remains the elephant in the room. Since this is an anthology that considers mystical approaches to death, the manner of the Seth Material’s delivery has some bearing here—particularly as Seth claims to be an energy-essence personality who has experienced death, not once, but many times. If Seth/Jane is to be believed, Seth continued to exist and remain communicative until Roberts’s death.

In most scholarly and popular treatments of the Seth Material, Roberts is classified as a “channel” for the disincarnate entity known as “Seth.” Using Michael F. Brown’s definition, channeling can be understood as “the use of altered states of consciousness to contact spirits—or, as many of its practitioners maintain, to experience spiritual energy from other times and dimensions.” Brown further observes that “channeling rests on a series of assumptions about the historical trajectory of human beings, both as individuals and as members of a community.” Brown’s framework accurately describes Roberts’s channeling experiences, but does not reflect the complexity of the Seth Material. Neither Roberts nor Butts liked to use the term “channel,” and Roberts never considered herself mystical in any theological sense, particularly as she rejected her Catholic upbringing. Instead, she attempted to examine her experiences as rationally as possible, even going so far as to propose a psychological theory, which she called “aspect psychology,” to understand the processes occurring within her psyche. Brown’s observations regarding the premises that guide
channeling, however, do apply to the Seth Material since it is an assemblage of ideas taken from Enlightenment assumptions, various scientific theories, existentialist notions, popular psychology, and perennial philosophy. In addition, the Seth Material reflects connections with past contours of alternative religious ideas while concurrently offering spiritual comfort that speaks to contemporary American ideals of autonomy, self-determinism, freedom, equality, and democratic access to knowledge.

The Arrival and Continuity of Seth

Beginning in 1963, while researching psychic phenomena with the plan to write a guidebook on developing one’s ESP (extrasensory perception) potential, Roberts began to experience strange dissociative moments that occasionally resulted in automatic writing. The initial contact with a disembodied spirit occurred while Roberts and Butts were using a store-bought Ouija board. Upon asking the Ouija board to identify the spirit who was communicating, the name “Frank Withers” was spelled out. As the Ouija sessions continued, the spirit Frank Withers confessed to being part of a larger personality named Seth (of which Frank Withers was only one of Seth’s individual physical incarnations). Roberts tells us that once Seth revealed “his” name, “he” no longer wished to be referred to as Frank Withers. Eventually, Roberts would discard the Ouija board altogether and be able to channel directly the Seth personality while in a trance state. Roberts’s ability to enter and exit this trance state at will was witnessed by numerous individuals over the course of twenty-one years. While in this trance state, Roberts’s voice audibly deepened, becoming identifiably masculine. Her facial mannerisms changed visibly, and she no longer required the use of eyeglasses when Seth/Jane was being channeled. Seth/Jane dictated copious pages of material that Butts carefully recorded and transcribed from 1963 to 1984. After Roberts’s death, Butts was committed to continuing his wife’s legacy by publishing additional volumes of dictated material including notes from early and private channeling sessions.

Seth/Jane maintains that the dictated material is not new information for humankind. According to Seth/Jane, her perspective reflects the philosophia perennis that has been accessible through esoteric wisdom traditions across time and cultures. Seth/Jane, however, uses her own terms when referencing ontological, epistemological, or theological concepts. For example, God, for Seth/Jane is referred to as “All-That-Is” and mind, spirit, and soul are referred to as “frameworks
of consciousness.” Many precepts found in the Seth Material can be linked with other esoteric or metaphysical traditions, of which Roberts claims only superficial prior knowledge. With over twenty years of channeling experience, Roberts is firmly established within the American metaphysical landscape.

After Roberts’s death, several of her friends and students formed regional Seth centers across the country. These Seth centers organized and published print catalogs and newsletters before establishing Internet websites that continually provide access to Roberts’s books. Several of Roberts’s first-generation friends and students are still actively promoting the Seth Material while the second and now third generation of readers and metaphysical writers continue to be intrigued with Seth/Jane’s work. Most of Seth/Jane’s books as well as the books Roberts authored alone are still available, having been reprinted several times as well as translated into other languages. New texts of early sessions have become available in the last ten years and can be ordered from various outlets. Internet web rings provide an ongoing network of communication for the original Seth readers and carry the Seth Material to new audiences. Websites dedicated to Seth/Jane, Roberts, and Butts include *The Seth Institute*, *The Seth Center*, *The Seth Learning Center*, and *Sethnet International*. There are also several Facebook pages and Twitter accounts dedicated to the Seth Material. With continuing class offerings, annual conferences, and reprints of Roberts’s work, it is clear that popular interest in the Seth Material remains strong. The attraction may lie in the Seth Paradigm’s eloquent exposition of our spiritual evolution during life, the continuity of our personality after death, and our greater significance in an incomprehensible universe.

**The Seth Paradigm**

In the Seth Paradigm, an individual human personality is only a portion of a greater “whole self” that exists in simultaneous time and multidimensionally. Seth/Jane will sometimes refer to whole self as the “soul” or the “multidimensional self.” Jane Roberts (the personality living in three-dimensional physical reality) is connected to Seth (a more advanced personality essence residing outside of physical reality). Seth is then connected to still more advanced nonphysical personalities as well as a parent whole self. An analogy can be made to a set of nesting dolls that not only nest, but also overlap outside of space, time, and the three-dimensionality that forms our universe. Subsequently, each nesting doll operates simultaneously in its particular reality in a state
of being that Seth/Jane calls “multidimensionality,” or the totality of multiple realities.

The whole self/soul or entity comprises many individual personalities, and each personality’s probable selves. The entity creates personalities in order to enrich its knowledge and spiritual development. Each personality has an infinite number of probable selves. Personalities and probable selves reside within different realities with unique physical or nonphysical laws of operation. Entities, personalities, and probable selves all exist simultaneously and are in constant communication in a chain of consciousness that links them with All-That-Is, which is pure consciousness.

Each individual, co-creating part (i.e., entity, personality, probable self) is in a different stage of development. They are individual of each other but merge with the entity. Each personality and probable self may draw on the resources of the entire entity as well as communicate with other entities. Such communication commonly occurs in dream states, in waking dream states, or, in the case of Jane Roberts, during trance states.

According to Seth/Jane, each entity uses its multiple individual consciousnesses (personalities, probable selves) to learn by exploring existences in different dimensions, realities, and probabilities. As such, Roberts and Butts are connected to Seth (in their twentieth-century physical incarnation) due to a mutually agreed upon arrangement that was determined prior to Roberts’s and Butt’s entrance into their earthly lives. Personalities enter into existences in order to complete lessons and/or work out issues carried over from previous existences.

The Nature of the Self and Its Relationship to All-That-Is

According to Seth/Jane, consciousness composes a much broader expanse of existence than we can currently grasp. She explains:

Consciousness is a way of perceiving the various dimensions of reality. Consciousness as you know it is highly specialized. The physical senses allow you to perceive the three-dimensional world, and yet by their very nature they can inhibit the perception of other equally valid dimensions. Most of you identify with your daily physically oriented self. You would not think of identifying with one portion of your body and ignoring all other parts, and yet you are doing the same thing when you imagine that the egotistical self carries the burden of your identity.

Seth/Jane uses familiar psychological terms but interprets and applies them differently. For instance, for Seth/Jane the “ego” represents the
The great creativity of consciousness is your heritage. It does not belong to mankind [sic] alone, however. Each living being possesses it, and the living world consists of spontaneous cooperation that exists between the smallest, and the highest, the greatest, and the lowly, between the atoms and the molecules and the conscious reasoning mind.\textsuperscript{15}

Seth/Jane asserts that matter is formed through conscious will at the entity level. As we form our universe through the cooperation of entities, it follows that we also form time, space, and mass reality at the physical level. Accordingly, since entities create the very physicality of their existence at multiple levels for the purpose of exploration,
growth, and advancement of their constituent parts, it follows that removal or withdrawal from physicality would not result in their extinguishment, only in their transformation. In the Seth Paradigm, the individual identity can theoretically continue in perpetuity.

**Death, Reincarnation, and Rebirth**

Simultaneous time is a key component of Seth/Jane’s conceptualizations of life, death, and reincarnation. Since time is merely a construct necessary in three-dimensional physical existence, we must set aside our perception of time because it hinders access to our true nature. Seth/Jane clarifies:

> But everything in the universe exists at one time, simultaneously. The first words ever spoken still ring through the universe and in your terms, the last words ever spoken have already been said, for there is no beginning. It is only your perception that is limited. There is no past, present, and future. These appear to those who exist in three-dimensional reality. Since I am no longer in it, I can perceive what you do not.16

Like our misconception of time, we must also release our mistaken conclusions regarding inorganic matter. In multidimensional simultaneity, entities create and order physical matter that is itself conscious. All matter is conscious, both organic and inorganic. Since the physical human body is composed of both organic and inorganic matter that is conscious energy—then “death” as we understand it is a fallacy. In the Seth Paradigm, one hears echoes of the scientific law of the Conservation of Energy, which states that energy cannot be created or destroyed. Seth/Jane asserts that it is due to our limited understanding of the nature of reality that we do not realize that energy can, in fact, be created. With regard to the second component of the Law of the Conservation of Energy, which holds that energy can only change form, Seth/Jane would suggest that what a human personality views as death is simply the shifting of energy from one system to another. According to Seth/Jane, energy is constantly being created as well as changing form. Death is merely the process of a personality changing its focus from three-dimensional reality to another reality, or in-between state.

Seth/Jane equates this in-between state to the dream states we experience nightly. For Seth/Jane, dreams reflect different dimensions or focal points. Subsequently, a dream state is “a coherent, purposeful, creative state” in which the personality engages when the body
is at rest.  

Seth/Jane indicates in several places throughout the Seth Material that the personality disengages from the physical body. Since time is simultaneous, and three-dimensionality is an illusion created for our shared reality, the individual personality can stand right beside its physical body and also be able to access other realities. The individual personality can also unite with the entity and return to physical reality upon awakening from sleep.

For readers new to the Seth Material, the idea of dimensions of existence beyond physical life in the form of dream states is just as complex as Seth/Jane’s construct of the universe, but these theories are tied together in the premise that death is only a shift of perception. There is no death of consciousness. Ever. Consciousness is the building block of the universe. It cannot be destroyed, only created. Yet creation involves the movement of energy from one form of consciousness to another—simultaneous evolution with no beginning or end. Therefore, the idea of death only serves the personality who exists in a physical reality where death is the constructed and understood path for transition to another reality. Seth/Jane reports that those personalities who experience astral projection of the self before death know and immediately understand the death cycle. Accordingly, Seth/Jane explains that humans must learn to view death as a necessary process in their development. Because personalities chose to incarnate in three-dimensional reality, they must learn that death is nothing more than the transition out of that three-dimensional reality. Because of Seth/Jane’s emphasis on choice, death must not be seen as an end. Further, it is only due to humanity’s narrow perception of the nature of the physical universe that our physical death seems final. When humans come to realize that consciousness is the building block of the universe and consciousness cannot be destroyed, then death will no longer be something to fear.

Seth/Jane reassures us that the personality will be assisted by guides or teachers during the transition out of physical existence. Guides are necessary when the personality has become too attached to limiting beliefs that are formed during a lifetime. Beliefs in damnation and hell or salvation and heaven can lead personalities to create and become trapped in these constructs. Eventually, or with the assistance of guides, personalities who have constructed these false in-between states will come to realize that they were responsible for creating their own heaven or hell. Guides also assist personalities who have not understood their transition. When personalities become too attached to their physical lives and do not understand their “death,” it indicates
that the personality was too affected by limiting belief systems during its physical life. It then has difficulty adjusting to the nonphysical state. Yet Seth/Jane reassures us, “all necessary explanations are given to those who are disoriented […] all efforts are made to refresh energies and spirits. It is a time of study and comprehension.”

During the in-between period, all of the personality’s memories return and its entire history is available for review. The personality confronts itself and meets others with whom it has interacted throughout its existence. Also at this time, the personality is made aware of emotional bonds with other personalities with which it may have shared experiences with—either reincarnationally or in other realities. After the personality transitions from three-dimensional reality and experiences the in-between state, Seth/Jane maintains that the personality has an unlimited array of choices before it. Personalities, in consultation with guides, can choose to reincarnate into another physical reality right away. Or, they can remain nonphysical and review past incarnations in order to glean insight regarding lessons they have already learned or have yet to learn. With guidance from teachers or advanced versions of themselves (accessible through the larger entity), personalities can choose to rest, remaining where they are, reincarnate, or enter a probable reality.

A probable reality is a version of the life the personality has just left, but it does not include other interacting personalities. The personality creates a probable reality so it may experience an event differently, or change the outcome or circumstances. The personality can choose to enter a different reality altogether, or another probability that does not include physical manifestation. Should the personality choose not to enter physical reality again, it subsequently has no need to reincarnate as a physical being. But this choice is only available to personalities who have mastered all of their lessons and are ready to move forward in their spiritual advancement.

As we have already noted, Seth/Jane asserts that that the personality must choose whether to reincarnate or not. Once the choice has been made, the personality must create the reality it will then occupy. In addition, the reincarnating personality must decide on a point of entry into the physical world. It can enter either at the moment of conception or as the fetus later develops. It depends on the circumstances the personality has determined ahead of time. In other words, if the personality has formed previous attachments to the personalities who are to be its parents in a particular physical reality, it may choose to incarnate at conception—but this is not necessary. As we have already
noted, all physical matter is conscious. Subsequently, the fetus has consciousness prior to any incarnation by a personality because the very atoms, cells, and molecules that comprise its physical body are already conscious. Seth/Jane explains:

The consciousness of matter is present in any matter—a fetus, a rock, a blade of grass, a nail [ . . . ] The reincarnating personality enters the new fetus according to its own inclinations, desires, and characteristics, with some built in safeguards. However there is no rule, then, saying that the reincarnating personality must take over the new form prepared for it either at the point of conception, in the very earliest months of the fetus’s growth, or even at the point of birth [ . . . ] The process is individual and determined by experience in other lives.20

After reincarnating into the body of an infant, the inner self is involved with the physical materialization of the personality’s emotions, thoughts, and interpretations. Consequently, the physical body is in a constant state of flux, responding to the imperatives and directives given it by the inner self. Seth/Jane states, “You grow the body [sic]. Its condition perfectly mirrors your subjective state at any given moment.”21

Upon reentry into the physical reality that the personality has chosen, Seth/Jane assures us that personalities have the innate understanding of the necessary root assumptions that are required to operate within their particular reality. Akin to Plato’s innatism, personalities arrive equipped with the ability to perceive the reality based upon previously constructed physical laws. Since all time is simultaneous, personalities may choose to reincarnate at any moment in history. It is not uncommon for a personality to experience different cultures and periods, choosing ahead of time their preferences in order to complete a particular lesson.

At no time does Seth/Jane uphold traditional monotheistic approaches to death. Instead, such theologies are acknowledged as being (1) created by the personalities for this particular reality, (2) helpful only in that they provide necessary moral frameworks, (3) unfortunate in their stagnation, and (4) ultimately limiting for the development of personalities.22 For Seth/Jane, reincarnation does not resemble traditional Asian philosophical and religious ideas of reincarnation as related to progression or punishment. Instead, in the Seth Paradigm, reincarnation is about choice and projects a distinctly American sensibility onto eternal existence.
The Seth Paradigm in Historical Perspective

The Seth Paradigm and the ideas Seth/Jane proposes did not arrive ex nihilo. Roberts’s oeuvre can be situated within a long tradition of alternative spiritual beliefs and practices in America. Most of these religious views coexisted with established traditions and have their roots in esoteric currents that reach back to Renaissance Neo-Platonism and Hermeticism. In the Anglo-American context, these ideas made their way into cultural consciousness via the Romantic poets, who were influenced by German idealist philosophy, the writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg, and translations of Asian philosophical works. In America, the Transcendentalist writers in New England, the New Thought movement, the Spiritualist movement, and authors working within Theosophical circles fueled metaphysical impulses and disseminated their ideas in print. Further, each of these movements elevated the spiritual development of the individual above traditional religious observance. The idea of spiritual masters entered popular consciousness with Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott’s Theosophical Society, founded in 1875, and American orders of Rosicrucians, including the Ancient and Mystical Order of the Rosae Crucis founded in 1915 in New York City. Other alternative spiritual organizations formed during what Philip Jenkins calls the “period of Emergence,” during 1910–1935 when “eccentric and mystical religious ideas became commonplace, providing rich opportunities for religious entrepreneurs.” The American entrepreneurial spirit merged with reconceptualized understandings of spirit vis-à-vis the potential for scientific investigation and fueled the nineteenth-century’s infatuation with the continuity of the personality after death.

The American phenomenon of channeling can be traced to its Spiritualist roots, when in 1848, the Fox Sisters of Hydesville, New York, began to hear rapping in their rented cottage, launching their careers as mediums and being credited with the founding of Spiritualism as an organized religion still practiced today. Other precursors of Jane Roberts include Edgar Cayce (1877–1945), who focused on healing, lost civilizations, spiritual growth, and esoteric knowledge. Cayce continues to retain a strong following in alternative healing circles. His works are continually reprinted, and there are numerous websites and organizations devoted to his work including the Association for Research and Enlightenment in Virginia Beach. Another important precursor is medium Alice Bailey (1880–1949) who advanced alternative understandings of the role of Christ and humanity’s potential, and it is interesting to note that Seth/Jane presents a unique understanding of
the role of Christ and Christianity as well. Last, Wilfred Kellogg’s *The Urantia Book* (1955) described reincarnation, self-healing, enlightenment, and the legendary civilization of Atlantis. In 1950, the Urantia Association was founded, launching an international movement, not unlike the one Roberts and Butts began after their experiences prompted them to hold classes and publish—eventually having their work disseminated by followers in various associations such as Sethnet and Seth Awareness Network. These various associations and publications were made possible by the open religious marketplace of an industrializing America and are perpetuated by publishing houses and organizations that cater to those seeking alternative explanations to the mysteries of death and dying. Despite earlier influences, many of Seth/Jane’s premises are unique adaptations of earlier esoteric themes, while others offer creative interpretations of depth psychology, philosophical metaphysics, religious and mystical traditions, and quantum theory.

It should be stated that Jane Roberts and Robert Butts consistently challenged their experiences and put Seth/Jane’s assertions to the test. At one point, they began a series of experiments with a psychologist. Though Roberts and Butts regularly questioned their experiences, the subjective nature of those experiences as well as the subjective practices surrounding their dictation, composition, and subsequent publishing do not offer empirically verifiable evidence. None of the claims made by Seth/Jane can be substantiated. But for many of Seth/Jane’s readers, such evidence is neither necessary nor of interest.

It is poignant to note how influential the Seth Material has been and how it continues to find expression in contemporary popular culture nearly forty years later. Probable selves (i.e., parallel universes), simultaneous time, and ascended beings are part and parcel of the Sci-Fi multiverse. Such concepts have become accepted as continuing tropes in popular science fiction, including *Star Trek, Star Wars, Dr. Who*, the *Stargate SG-1*, and *Stargate Atlantis* franchises. No doubt these ideas will continue to be explored and flourish in future iterations. In the self-help arena, books by authors such as Gary Zukav, Ken Wilber, Deepak Chopra, Dan Millman, and others continue the themes presented in the Seth Material. There is little doubt that, for the time being at least, the Seth Paradigm will find new channels of proliferation.

The Seth Paradigm: Conclusions

For Seth/Jane, the creation of physical matter by individual personalities and mass entities is inherent in the nature of reality. We form our
physical universe, the earth, and our bodies according to previously arranged agreements at a meta-consciousness level. We do so for individual entities to experience different types of conditions through an infinite number of permutations. Entities give form to personalities; personalities give form to probable selves, even something as fleeting as a thought can create an event and foster a probable reality. All of this happens simultaneously, yet in a multiplicity of dimensions. The entire process occurs throughout infinity with unconditional support, growth, and creativity.

For some, the Seth Material is a viable theoretical paradigm through which to understand the universe and the individual’s place within it. There is little doubt that the ideas that Seth/Jane presents offer an inviting conceptualization of life and death with the hope of multiple reincarnations. It is comforting to believe that one’s identity continues to live, grow, and prosper long after the physical body is shed. By extension, it is also reassuring to know that one is never alone. Were we to believe the Seth Paradigm’s view that we live in a multidimensional universe and our current existence is only one of many, then past mistakes could be relived and remedied. We could reexperience happy moments and reunite with loved ones to enjoy an endless number of adventures with them in other dimensions and probabilities. There is no punishment, no hell in which to eternally roast—no heaven in which to eventually stagnate. We are the creators of our own experiences, joys, torments, bodies, lives, and worlds. And we bear full responsibility for these creations.

The Seth Paradigm, however, falls prey to the same criticisms that plague other metaphysical or esoteric traditions that attempt to explain away the nature of suffering. The Seth Paradigm maintains that we create every aspect of our reality. It follows then that we are duly responsible for our own suffering. Though Seth/Jane denounces all acts of abuse and violence as morally wrong, the fact remains that—in the Seth Paradigm—it is the victims who must ultimately be held accountable for their own circumstances. Victims have chosen to experience their torments, and have previously arranged to do so prior to their entrance into physical life. Further, Seth/Jane’s claim that evil does not exist recalls Augustine’s *Privatio Boni* theodical doctrine, and does little to alleviate real evil experienced by so many in today’s world. For those suffering the all too real effects of disease, poverty, abuse, and violence—the insult here is great. Seth/Jane’s assertion that suffering is both misunderstood and willingly endured offers little hope for change, and instead reinforces status quos that are or
should be intolerable. Recognizing this, the Seth Paradigm has value as an intriguing body of metaphysical literature that speaks to past and present mystical yearnings, while also reminding us of the ways in which we do, in fact, create realities of life and death.

**Notes**

1. For clarity, throughout this chapter I refer to the “Seth” personality as Seth/Jane, Jane Roberts as Roberts, and Jane’s husband Robert Butts, as Butts.
2. After Roberts’s death, Robert Butts continued to publish notes and dictation taken from Seth/Jane sessions in additional books under the series titles *The Personal Sessions*, *The Early Sessions*, and *The Early Class Sessions*.
7. Ibid., x.
10. Throughout the years Roberts channelled Seth she held classes, either ESP or Seth sessions, for friends and others who became her students. These classes took place at her home in Elmira, New York.
11. The Austin Seth Center published a bimonthly print magazine entitled *Reality Change* during the 1990s.


13. Seth/Jane tells us that there are also fragment personalities, of which Frank Withers was a fragment personality of the Seth personality. Roberts, *Seth Speaks*, 157.


18. We are told throughout the many books that make up the Seth Material, that Jane Roberts herself was not interested in nor did she participate in organized religion. In fact, though Roberts operates within a culturally Christian framework given her social location in twentieth-century America, she discarded Catholic and Protestant theologies as viable epistemologies.


20. Ibid., 194.

21. Ibid., 41.

22. Seth/Jane refers to the “Christ Drama,” suggesting that the historical Jesus was not crucified, and that “Christ” was actually introduced to humans through the persons of John, Jesus, and Paul, unfolding a larger cosmic drama that was designed by and for personalities in this dimension or reality. See Roberts, *Seth Speaks*, 206–208, 366–368.


24. For more on this, see Christopher M. Moreman (ed.), *The Spiritualist Movement: Speaking with the Dead in America and around the World*, 3 Vols. (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2014).


Symbolic Death of the Subject in the Structure of Jacques Lacan

Jin Sook Kim

Introduction

Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) developed his theory of subjectivity, confronting the problem of desire as the core of existence, and arguing that no other question could help us more in our struggle to understand the question of what human nature is and how it is constructed. In the Lacanian vision, a subject continues to be born, to develop throughout one’s lifetime, and to die; however, this process is not identical to the biological change in an organism, since the birth and the death of the Lacanian subject are dependent upon the network of symbolic law and language. For Lacan, the death of the subject does not refer to biological death, but to the moment when the subject transcends the symbolic trap and experiences her or his own desire in the form of mystic experience or sublimation. Lacan analyzes a subject’s mystical experience as a form of symbolic death, mainly using the concept of death drive and jouissance.

Lacan does not engage the notion of mysticism until his latter period (after 1960) when he advances into poststructuralism. At this point, the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real are all considered to be interconnected in the formation of the subject. Structuralism basically concentrates on the symbolic and linguistic network, whereas poststructuralism tends to shift the focus into “the real” within the symbolic. When mysticism is investigated by way of (post) structuralism, it is then examined in terms of exteriority rather than interiority,
which means that the main focus is not on analyzing and interpreting a subject’s consciousness and experience but on defining the relational, topological, social, and historical significance of the subject’s mystic experience.

The Lacanian theory of subject has a subversive implication in the study of religion, since Lacan shifts the locus of a subject from the ego’s pure reason to the subject’s pure desire, from the ego’s consciousness to the subject’s unconscious, and from a signified (meaning) to a signifier (the system of difference), and from a single religion to many “religions.” What is crucial in Lacanian discourse on mysticism is the introduction of sexual theory into the realm of the sacred. Lacan reduces sexual difference to its linguistic and logical dimension, and combines the formula of sexuation with jouissance. In this chapter, I will show that feminine jouissance is the source of a subject’s symbolic death—destruction of a symbolic order, temporary de-subjectification, or ecstasy—and it is also equivalent to the death drive that makes the subject go beyond the pleasure principle and the symbolic so as to encounter the real. The death drive is not only a will to destruction but also a will to creation *ex nihilo*. So, after experiencing symbolic death, the subject gains the capacity to reorganize intersubjective relations and to construct a new symbolic order.

**A Variety of Meanings of Death**

Death has been one of the major themes in metaphysics and religious narratives. Death is located at a critical point in Lacanian structure as well, having evolved its notion throughout the development of ideas. For Lacan, death does not chiefly refer to biological death. In *Seminar VII*, Lacan distinguishes between two deaths. The first death does mean physical death, which succeeds in terminating a human’s biological life but fails to terminate the cycle of destruction and revival of the matter of the body. The second death is defined as “the point at which the very cycles of the transformations of nature are annihilated.”

Slavoj Žižek elaborates on how Lacan has developed the concept of death, classifying it as three stages. In the first stage seen in “The Function and the Field of Speech and Language” (1953) in *Ecrits*, the “word” is death of a thing. When the reality is symbolized at the time of the appearance of the symbolic, confined in a symbolic network, the thing is more present in the concept of a word than in its physical reality. Consequently, we cannot go back to the immediate reality without having recourse to the word, which implies an absence of the
thing. In the second stage, in “Seminar on Purloined Letter” (1966) that is part of *Ecrits*, the emphasis moves from word to language as a linguistic structure. When human beings are seized in the signifier’s complex chain, it renders a “mortifying effect” on them. Human subjects have to enter an automatic order unsettling their natural homeostatic balance through “compulsive repetition” of the death drive. In the third stage when Lacan’s teaching focuses on the real beyond the symbolic, Lacan adopts the concept of the second death that he already mentioned in his *Seminar VII*: the radical annihilation of the symbolic order through which reality is constituted. In other words, this death implies the obliteration of the signifying network itself—the symbolic death. In this chapter, I will use the second death—the symbolic death—to explore Lacan’s understanding of death in conversation with mystical experience.

Žižek does not include physical death in the classification above. According to Lorenzo Chiesa, however, Lacan views physical death as a mere “symbolic construction.” Even though an individual is dead in reality, he is present in the Other’s fantasy as the symbolic object. In the case of suicide of a subject, the subject gets to satisfy the “death wish,” suppressing the desire to be recognized as a being that refuses the symbolic. Thus physical death cannot be a true death since the dead becomes the “eternal sign” for the Other’s fantasy. Chiesa maintains that a subject’s symbolic death should be attained only by means of the death of the symbolic order, because it is impossible for the subject to completely escape the symbolic. Nevertheless, a temporary status of de-subjectification in “the Real/void-of-the-Symbolic” is a logical consequence of symbolic death, as well as the ultimate ethical attainment of psychoanalytic work. I interpret the temporary separation of a subject from the symbolic as a kind of mystical experience, in which a subject encounters the real, and the structure of subjectivity along with intersubjectivity becomes extinct. This moment is a time of death, but paradoxically a time of true awakening, providing life energy for the subject.

The Genesis of a Subject

The birth of a subject is a precondition for the death of a subject. In “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason since Freud” (1957) published in *Ecrits*, Lacan argues that Freud discovered “the self’s radical ex-centricity,” as well as the notion of “radical heteronomy.” This Freudian–Lacanian subjectivity seems contrary to
the traditional metaphysical subjectivity with centrality and autonomy. The heteronomous ex-centric subject begins to emerge from the moment when the speaking subject enters the symbolic and starts to be determined by the symbolic order. “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious” (1960) in *Ecrits* delineates the life of a subject from its genesis to the death.

The Lacanian subject should be the “speaking” subject, taking part in the symbolic and following the symbolic order. The genesis of the subject occurs in the moment of “signification.” The symbolic is composed of signifiers that are necessarily related to a structure. In a structure, only the “difference” is the determining attribute between the signifiers, so that a certain signifier does not have a specific fixed meaning in a differentiation system. Thus, not only can a signified correspond to many signifiers, but a signifier can correspond to many signifieds; in fact, corresponding a signifier to many signifieds is a crucial feature in the symbolic. A subject emerges when a signifier is united with a signified at the quilting point, *point de capiton*, where signification is attained. It is “the quilting point between the signifier and the signified,” by which “the signifier stops the indefinite sliding of signification.” The *point de capiton* produces the signifiers’ meaning by fixation and brings an individual to the beginning of a subject by the retroactive effect. It is the moment of the birth of subjects—barred subjects (which are also penetrated by signifiers)—from mythical individuals, and it simultaneously indicates the space shift of the subject from the imaginary to the symbolic.

Once a subject is born, the interplay of symbolic identification and imaginary identification constitutes an “ego ideal” and an “ideal ego” respectively. The symbolic identification simply signifies that a subject participates in the symbolic; the symbolic order affects the subject, and the subject acquires its symbolic identity through this course. The symbolic identification is produced by the identification with the Other (the big Other) in the symbolic in the last stage of the Oedipus complex, which creates the ego ideal (the superego, conscience) as a result. The very signifier “Name-of-the-Father” gives a subject a symbolic name and places the subject in the symbolic. This process provides a subject with topological status, where the subject can be located in society.

The imaginary identification takes place in the imaginary, which then creates the ideal ego. To be specific, in the mirror stage when the subject is fascinated by his or her mirror image, the ego is constituted by the identification of the image of the other (the little other).
The general perspective of epistemology since modern empiricism understands self-consciousness as instituted by the imaginary relation between the ego and the other, although there are some differences among the philosophers. In the Lacanian sense, the other does not just refer to the other counterpart such as people or things outside an individual self, since the other is located within me. Thus, for Lacan, the other refers to something imaginary in the subject such as the projection of the ego, the ideal body image, the perfect image of a hero or a heroine, and the divine image. The ego should be distinguished from the subject, in that the ego functions only in the imaginary so as not to represent a whole individual, while the subject extends from the imaginary and the symbolic to the real. The Lacanian subject, “the core of our being does not coincide with the ego.” Lacan involves the subject in the unconscious, in opposition to the ego in consciousness. This discussion of Lacanian mysticism focuses on the subject rather than the ego, under the condition of the splitting of the personality.

**Death Drive and Jouissance**

The Other poses a critical question, “What do you want?” (*Chè vuoi?*) beyond the two identifications. This question leads a subject to the awareness of the subject’s own desire beyond the identification with symbolic order and with imaginary perfection. To answer this question we first need to recognize Lacan’s new proclamation, “There is no Other of the Other,” that is, there is no Name-of-the-Father any longer. In the Lacanian structure until the mid-1950s, the Other of the Other, the Name-of-the-Father, guaranteed symbolic order from the outside. The Other was founded on the Other of the Other, the Name-of-the-Father. But, after losing transcendence, the symbolic function of the father exists in the particular instantiations in the real father. Lacan’s subversive declaration indicates that the real makes a hole in the symbolic which makes it impossible for the symbolic to sustain a whole complete structure. This also implies that Lacan shifts from structuralism to poststructuralism.

Lacan provides “fantasy” as an answer for that question (What do you really want?) in the situation where there is not the Other of the Other. Fantasy fills out the void, and opens “the desire of the Other,” “the lack in the Other.” Fantasy makes us not only feel that desire can be satisfied but also avoid approaching the death drive. This is because fantasy renders the world “absolute signification,” so that we experience the world as consistent and meaningful.
desires as well, because it has a lack in it. It is a real surprise that the
Other in the symbolic turns out to be lacking and desiring rather than
the perfect Being fulfilled by signifiers in the symbolic. According to
Lacan, desire is not fulfilled or satisfied, but constituted through fan-
tasy so that we learn how to desire. Desire structured through fantasy,
however, is a defense against the desire of the Other, the pure form of
desire—the death drive. Lacan has argued that we should not give
up on our desire. It is the desire of the Other beyond fantasy that
we should not renounce rather than the fantasy-based desire. We
should traverse the fantasized desire and encounter the desire of the
Other—the death drive. In the Lacanian system, the death drive is an
expression of insistent desire of a subject, orienting the real that makes
the symbolic deficient and lacking.

Lacan’s death drive is anchored to Sigmund Freud’s death drive
but highly distinctive in its conception from that of Freud. The main
text that explains how Freud creates the concept of the death drive is
Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920). Before this text, Freud had
thought that all human organisms tended to maximize pleasure by
reducing the intensity of stimulation and maintaining homeostasis. For
Freud, pleasure is defined as a low amount of excitement or stimula-
tion in an organism. But he observed that PTSD (posttraumatic stress
disorder) patients continued to recollect what they suffered in war and
thereby betrayed the pleasure principle—avoiding pain and pursuing
pleasure. The patients’ “repetition automatism” caused them pain. As
a result, Freud hypothesizes the existence of the death drive beyond
the pleasure principle. While the pleasure principle serves to minimize
the degree of stimulation at the limit of maintaining life, the death
drive nullifies physical tension by discontinuing life and returning to
the state of equilibrium. Lacan understands in the end that Freud’s
death drive substitutes a subject for nature. Lacan names Freud’s
death drive “nirvana principle.”

Lacan envisages the death drive as the core concept of his psycho-
analytic theory building upon Freud, but he does not resort to the nir-
vana principle to conceptualize the Lacanian death drive. Lacan argues
that the death drive should be beyond the instinct to return to the state
of equilibrium in an inorganic and inanimate state. Subsequently,
for Lacan, the death drive is situated in the historical dimension in the
network of a signifying chain rather than in the biological domain.
Thus, he supposes “the necessity of the moment of creation ex nihilo
as that which gives birth to the historical dimension of the drive.”
The moment of creation ex nihilo is the mythical point that sublimes
the biological instinct in the subject’s drive. In the beginning was the Word—the signifier.” In this moment of creation ex nihilo, the signifier entered into the world, making the real thing (das Ding) dead. Without the signifier at the beginning, it is impossible for the drive to be articulated as historical rather than biological. According to Jacques-Alain Miller, in Lacan, the signifier is “the engine” of the death drive, since the signifier introduces not only the locus and the lack in the real but also mortification and death in the living. For Lacan, the death drive can be productive in the domain of creation ex nihilo even though the death drive is basically orienting destruction. Consequently, Lacan understands the death drive to be a will to absolute destruction beyond putrefaction, a will to create from nothing, and a will to resume. Whereas Freud divides drives into the death drive (thanatos) and the life drive (eros) in his Civilization and Its Discontents (1930), Lacan supposes every drive should be the death drive, excluding the life drive. This is because drives aim to annihilate the drive itself, involve a subject in repetition, go beyond the pleasure principle, and enter the domain of jouissance where the subject can paradoxically experience pain along with pleasure. Thus jouissance is “the pass toward death.”

Jouissance is equivalent to “the death drive” in relation to the concept of “pleasure” and “the pleasure principle.” Jouissance and the death drive tend to disorder the symbolic, whereas pleasure and the pleasure principle are inclined to maintain the order and homeostasis of the symbolic. It seems that the concept of jouissance is analogous to that of pleasure; however, in the Lacanian system, jouissance is antagonistic to pleasure. Jouissance pursues extreme stimulation that pleasure tries to prevent; while pleasure maintains homeostasis and stability that jouissance attempts to break. “The function of the pleasure principle is, in effect, to lead the subject from signifier to signifier, by generating as many signifiers as are required to maintain at as low a level as possible the tension.” In addition, the pleasure principle regulates the distance between the subject and das Ding. When a subject’s death drive makes the subject transgress the distance and come close to das Ding in the real, the subject comes to suffering. So we can conclude that jouissance and the death drive are oriented to the real while pleasure and the pleasure principle make a subject remain in the symbolic.

For this reason, jouissance goes through a transformation of its concept along with the conceptual evolution of the real. In the earlier work of Lacan, the concept of jouissance had not been used for “the
pass toward death.” Lacan did not give much significance to jouissance and just used it as enjoyment, simply pleasure in the symbolic and the imaginary. In the latter stage, he begins to associate jouissance with the real. Whereas jouissance in the imaginary does not relate to death and the death drive, jouissance involved in the real in the symbolic becomes an incentive to the death drive. Miller articulates Lacanian jouissance in terms of dimensions. In the first paradigm, jouissance is in the imaginary, based on libido. Thus jouissance is not related to the subject but the ego as an imaginary agency, a reservoir of libido. Imaginary jouissance is not intersubjective but intraimaginary. In the second paradigm, jouissance is in the symbolic, signified by language, connecting to the death drive and desire. Last, in the impossible jouissance, the real jouissance, the satisfaction is associated with the real.

In order to better understand the subject’s jouissance (rather than the ego’s jouissance in the imaginary), the exploration of the relationship between the real and the symbolic is necessary. In the earlier stage where the symbolic has privilege over any other elements in Lacanian structure, the real is located beyond the symbolic. The real is situated outside of the symbolic, not being symbolized. The real is “what resists symbolization absolutely.” While the symbolic has tension between the presence and the absence in its linguistic structure, the real does not have the absence. The real is something purely present. And the real is defined as “the impossible” because it is impossible to be imagined, be included in the symbolic, and be attained. Yet, in his latter stage, when Lacan maintains, “there is no Other of the Other,” the symbolic and the real interact differently from in the earlier period. The real now overlaps with the symbolic rather than beyond the symbolic. This means that there is no independent relationship between the two dimensions. Without the real, there is not the symbolic, and vice versa.

According to Lacan in his Seminar VII, a subject’s encounter of the real by transgressing the pleasure principle and experiencing das Ding can be a tragic event because das Ding is the “Sovereign Good” and the subject cannot cope with this extreme good in the real. So Lacan understands encountering the real will bring a negative influence on the subject. But later his notion of das Ding has been incorporated into object à so that object à starts to imply the real. At first, object à belonged in the imaginary since “a” signifies the ego and the other as semblances of the mirror image in L-Schema. When “a” is used in the formula of the fantasy (S◊a), it signifies the object of desire in the imaginary. And in the Seminar XX, it is still expounded as the imaginary even though it has the implication of the real and the symbolic.
According to Žižek, object à refers to the remnant of das Ding after das Ding goes through symbolization. Since object à passed through the symbolizing process, it is entirely different from the primitive original real that has fullness and completeness. Such object à has attributes of loss, deficiency, logical contradiction, paradox, impossibility, and aporia. “It is essential: for desire comes from the Other, and jouissance is located on the side of das Ding.” This means that desire is associated with the symbolic, whereas jouissance is constituted in the real. Object à can interlink the symbolic with the real, connecting to jouissance. Lacan classifies two types of jouissance in terms of sexual relations and the way to treat object à.

Phallic Jouissance, Other-Jouissance, and the Death of the Subject

“There’s no such thing as a sexual relationship,” said Lacan. Parodying this statement, Žižek said, “There’s no such thing as a religious relationship.” How can a sexual relationship be associated with a religious relationship? In this section, I hope to demonstrate how a sexual relationship can connect to a religious relationship by means of jouissance.

The statement “there’s no such thing as a sexual relationship” manifests that the male subject and the female subject have nothing to do with each other in making sexual differentiation rather than that there’s no sexual relationship between the other sexes. This can be possible since Lacan shifts the problem of sexual differences from the biological matter to the linguistic and logical realm. Being a man or a woman depends on the position in the symbolic order rather than on biological difference, because sexual development is a historical (social) event formed in the relationship to others, rather than a mechanical process depending on biological natural law. An individual, regardless of one’s biological sex, can be located either in the female subject or in the male subject by one’s choice. This is because, according to Lacan, sexual differences are determined by the subject’s relation to the signifier “phallic.” This phallocentric category of gender originates from Freud’s idea that there is only one libido that is masculine. This symbolic phallus has a privileged status in Lacanian structure. The symbolic phallus is a “pure signifier” that does not have a signified. In the same vein, Žižek understands that the phallus is a transcendental signifier. So the phallus can signify everything as well as nothing. In some contexts, the
phallus is used as a signifier of “the lack of a signifier.” A male subject declares, “I have the phallus,” whereas a female subject declares “I am the phallus.” Regarding the function of the phallus, a man stands for the statement “the whole men are castrated,” but a woman adopts a stance of “not the whole women are castrated.”

Lacan associates his sexual theory with jouissance, developing two types of jouissance in his Seminar XX: Phallic Jouissance and Other-Jouissance. Phallic jouissance is linked to male sexuation, in which a man is in the position to try to satisfy his desire and lack of being by trying to “have” the phallus. This is also connected to the tendency for the male subject to pursue a totality (the whole are castrated) by filling object à in his lack of being and making “One.” This type of jouissance is closer to the Freudian life drive (eros) because eros searches for oneness and unification. It is not difficult to experience phallic jouissance in everyday life, for instance, in sexual intercourse, physical and mental enjoyment, and a variety of ordinary experiences accompanying pain and pleasure. Žižek exemplifies the Marxist “surplus-value” as object à so that most of the subjects in the capitalism system try to satisfy their desire by producing and consuming surplus value as object à, which can be a demonstration of phallic jouissance.

On the other hand, the Other-jouissance is jouissance that is feminine and supplementary (not complementary) to the phallic jouissance. Lacan presents the two faces of the Other in his Seminar XX. Aside from the Other that Lacan has related to the father function as a locus of the signifiers in the symbolic, he introduced another supplementary “the Other” relating to the feminine jouissance as a face of God. In the Other-jouissance, the feminine subject identifies herself with the lack in the Other. This stems from the feminine tendency that nullifies the function of the phallus and disavows being One. Even if she negates totality (not whole are castrated), she is complete and there is something more. Miller maintains that the subject is reduced to nothing because the Other determines the subject completely. The more the Other becomes filled, the more the subject becomes emptied until the subject becomes a hole, a hole with different modalities.

The phallic jouissance is subordinated to the symbolic order’s limitation and instability, but the Other-jouissance is eternal as we can see in artistic sublimation and religious ecstasy. This is because the Other-jouissance goes beyond the phallus and the symbolic and subverts the existing order, relating to sublimation as asexual and desexual libido—Freudian sublimation that reorients the drive and Lacanian sublimation that transcends an object into das Ding. According to Lacan, mystics
like St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross could experience the Other-jouissance. Since the Other (feminine)-jouissance has little to do with biological femininity, it is possible for male mystics to participate in the Other-jouissance. The association between “femininity” and “Other” in the concept of jouissance originates from the idea that a woman takes her position in the “Other” not only because men always consider women as the “other” sex, but also because women are only partly defined by the symbolic and the function of the phallus. For Lacan, Other-jouissance signifies God as well, although it does not necessarily refer to the Christian God. Miller claims that Lacanian genealogy shifts from the Father to the supplementary feminine jouissance. Žižek argues that Lacan develops feminine logic of “the Non-All” since Lacan is aware of the danger of substantiation of “rupture into a Beyond” as well as of the universality. Thus, Žižek’s “there’s no such thing as a religious relationship” implies that women of “the Non-All” as well as God belong to the real in the symbolic and leave the symbolic structure open to the real. Consequently, feminine jouissance transcends the symbolic confinement of the phallic jouissance, induces the death of the subject and the nihilation of subjectivity, and opens to infinity.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined Lacan’s understanding of subjectivity, exploring the arc from the subject’s birth to his/her death. The Lacanian subject, unlike its Cartesian counterpart, is far from a substance that never changes over time. In the beginning of the formation of a subject, the subject of the unconscious is constituted by the Other while the ego of consciousness is generated by the other, through the process of identification. Subjectivity is accompanied by alterity.

Lacan set a strategy to overcome limitation of such alterity and to pursue individual subjectivity. Lacan places a subject of “desire” in the core of his philosophy so that he derives other crucial concepts from desire. He urges the subject to see through the fantasized desire and to encounter the true desire of the Other—the death drive. The death drive is a repetitive will to destruct the existing order and to create from nothing in the realm of human history. Jouissance is the attraction toward death, going beyond the pleasure principle and encountering the real. In the Lacanian context, death signifies the symbolic death of the subject, the destruction of the symbolic order. Mystical experience and ecstasy can be interpreted as a symbolic death by means of the feminine jouissance. Mystical experience can be a critical event
when a subject is able to revolutionize her own individual life after the momentary death experience. The event of symbolic death, paradoxically, is a time of true awakening, providing life energy for the subject. Simultaneously, the fact that a subject experiences a temporary status of de-subjectification ensures that she gains the creative power to reorganize the symbolic order and intersubjectivity.

Notes

4. Ibid., 149.
8. Ibid., 682.
15. Ibid., 132.
16. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 211.
21. Ibid., 213.
29. Ibid., 69.
34. Lacan introduces the Borromean knot in order to display how the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real are interconnected. If one link of the three links in the Borromean knot is cut, the three links all separate, which implies all of the three domains are crucial to give order to a subject. Then, the subject can continue to shift one’s position from one point to another in the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real, including all three domains as one’s spatial field.
42. Ibid., 80.
43. Ibid., 81.
44. Žižek, The Sublime Object, 254.
45. Lacan, Seminar XX, 73.
46. Lacan, Ecrits, 582.
48. Ibid.,72.
50. Lacan, Seminar XX, 73.
51. Ibid., 82.
52. Ibid., 74.
55. Lacan, Seminar XX, 76.
57. Žižek, “Il n’y a pas de rapport religieux,” 100.
Anomalous Experiences and the Bereavement Process

Callum E. Cooper, Chris A. Roe, and Graham Mitchell

The Process of Bereavement

Bereavement can be described as a universally experienced set of negative emotional stages following the loss of an object we hold dear. This typically involves the loss of people through physical separation or biological death, but can occur in a variety of circumstances, including separation from childhood toys or the loss of a limb through accident and amputation. To be able to experience such a personal loss we must first have formed an attachment to something, or typically someone. A psychological attachment is “the strong, affectionate tie we have with special people in our lives that leads us to feel pleasure when we interact with them and to be comforted by their nearness during times of stress”. Bowlby presented a general theory of attachment between people, particularly with regard to understanding attachments between child and caregiver. He considered terminations of attachment through death, and observed that people commonly experience emotional shock, and then physiological stress and anxiety from such loss (termed separation anxiety). However, over time the bereaved will come to accept the loss, readjust to the situation, and form new attachments.

This process of bereavement may be experienced in several stages before coping and any form of recovery takes place. Based on interviews and observations with the dying and bereaved, Kübler-Ross
characterized these stages as involving shock, disorganization, volatile emotions, guilt, loss and loneliness, relief, and reestablishment. It should be noted that individual cases need not involve all the stages put forth by Kübler-Ross, or have them occur in a set sequence.

**Effects of the Bereavement Process**

As well as the emotional and psychological impact of bereavement, the loss of someone can lead to tangible physical effects. Initial feelings represent a form of fear reaction, which can include stomach disorders, feelings of sickness, dizziness (reported as a drunken feeling), breathing difficulty, and a tightening of the throat, and can last from several hours to a few days.

Bereaved individuals have been found to be psychologically preoccupied with an image of the deceased and feelings of guilt, and express hostility toward friends and relatives. Their behaviour was unfocused, with restless, aimless movement and actions and with no pattern of organized activity, so that they were unable to complete tasks or sit still. The duration of bereavement depended on how well the individual carried out their grief work; they had to acknowledge and work with the distress of bereavement before adjustment was possible and the loss could be accepted.

Fulton referred to *low grief death* (in which death was predictable and could, to a degree, be prepared for) and *high grief death* (in which death was sudden and unexpected). The former allows for the bereavement process to begin even before the dying individual passes away. Where an unanticipated bereavement occurs, there may be the additional fear that other sudden deaths could occur to friends or family members, so that the sufferer avoids things associated with the death (e.g., travelling in cars if the deceased died in a car accident) and often avoids socializing or attempting to reform relationships.

If a person struggles to accept the loss of a loved one through death, then healthy adjustments to the loss may become difficult and this inability to refocus can prove psychologically damaging. Morgan and Morgan found this to be the case, particularly with the loss of a lifelong partner in the elderly, where the bereaved found it difficult to establish new interests in life, leading to depression, loneliness, despair, and ultimately a decline in health. Hendin refers to this as “broken heart syndrome”, and describes a study of the deaths of 371 people in which the death rate among people whose spouses had died in the
previous twelve months (12%) was higher than a baseline for those who had lost another family member (5%). The death rate for widowers was higher than that for widows, which was attributed to males having greater difficulty in expressing emotions or sharing feelings. Less severe outcomes include weight loss, sleep deprivation, depression, and anger.\textsuperscript{15}

Although in a majority of cases natural resources and social support allow the grief to run its course, some may require medical advice or treatment.\textsuperscript{16} In such cases, “it is as if the home and way of life were enshrined at the time of loss, and the return of the deceased is awaited”. Such an expectancy effect could lead to prolonged “disbelief and numbness”\textsuperscript{17} and also give rise to experiences of “sensing the invisible presence”, which the mainstream would typically attribute to delusional or psychotic episodes induced by the trauma of bereavement. However, research that has focused on such experiences has suggested that they can have a therapeutic value, particularly where they are interpreted as evidence of the continued existence of the deceased person. We will review some of this work in the remainder of this chapter, looking initially at the range of spontaneous experiences that are regarded by the experient as signs of postmortem survival, and go on to consider attempts to induce such experiences under more controlled conditions.

**Spontaneous Post-Death Experiences**

An exceptional experience (or anomalous experience) can be described as an occurrence that appears to be “out of the ordinary”. As Smith\textsuperscript{18} explains, “It can be anomalous in the sense that it may appear as unusual to the person having the experience or in the sense that the processes involved in the experience appear to be ‘non-ordinary’.” Experiences classed as anomalous by the experient might include unusual auditory phenomena, apparitions, poltergeist-type activity, and dreams that seem to incorporate communication with others. The first formal studies of such occurrences were conducted by members of the Society for Psychical Research (est. 1882), and early work was reported by Gurney, Myers, and Podmore in the classic two-volume book *Phantasms of the Living*\textsuperscript{19} and in the “Report on the Census of Hallucinations”.\textsuperscript{20} These publications describe extensive and detailed studies of exceptional human experiences among large samples of participants. Here, we shall specifically focus on the findings of experiences surrounding bereaved individuals.
Waking Experiences of the Bereaved

Exceptional experiences concerning a deceased person that are reported by bereaved individuals have been referred to as “post-death experiences” or “after-death communications” and/or contacts. The following example cases are taken from the work of Haraldsson:\(^2\)

The night after my husband died I could not sleep and was at home in my bed and very lonely. Suddenly I sensed him standing by my bed. He seemed to be covered in a mist. I saw him and felt his hand as he stroked my head and recited part of a well-known poem that was about how good it was to rest and then wake up one day surrounded by eternal joy. I felt quite differently after this.

I lost my husband in the year 1950. It was as it usually is—quite tough. A week later his sister died. She had been a patient for a long time. I went east with the body, to Arnessysla. The weather was awful, very windy and the funeral took a long time and I was very cold. The night I came back west I put my clothes on and lay down on the bench and he appeared and held me so tight...I could not see him but I could feel it was his embrace...This was about half a month after he was buried. I felt he had come to comfort me and give me strength.

I sometimes sense my deceased husband, who died at 74 years of age, as well as my mother. I do not see them but I can hear them and feel their touch. I sometimes feel a stroke on my cheek and then I think of the dead. They also come to me when I am thinking strongly of them and if I need them. This is normal to me and I am never scared. I feel peaceful.

Burton\(^2\) conducted doctoral research on post-death experiences following his own bereavement experience regarding his late mother:

I had always felt a strong bond between us but by September most of us in the family had returned to our routines, reconciled to her death. One evening that September my wife and I were entertaining relatives. I was in the kitchen cutting a pineapple when I heard what I thought were my wife’s footsteps behind me to the right. I turned to ask the whereabouts of a bowl but realized that she had crossed to the left outside of my field of vision. I turned in that direction to repeat my question and saw my mother standing there...‘Ma!’ I exclaimed. She smiled—and then dissolved. She did not disappear; she dissolved. I let out a great sigh and felt as if a heavy weight had been lifted from me, a weight I had not even felt until then.

Burton related this account to his sister the next morning who was upset to hear of the experience, partly due to her not having had such
an experience herself. However, she believed Burton’s account because he had described in detail a pale-blue gown that Burton had never seen before but which his mother had tried on while shopping with her daughter just two weeks before her death.

Rees reported on a longitudinal study of the effects of bereavement that focused on “The Hallucinations of Widowhood.” As in the *Census of Hallucinations*, the term “hallucinations” was used very broadly, referring to anomalous sensory experiences ranging from a rather vague “sense of presence,” through familiar smells, touch, and voices, to full-blown visual apparitions of the dead. Rees interviewed widows (n = 227) and widowers (n = 66) and reported that a generalized sense of presence of the dead was among the most common of experiences, occurring in 39.2% of cases, while around 13–14% of respondents reported visual or auditory hallucinations. In 11% of cases, the bereaved claimed not only to have experienced the presence of the dead, but also to have spoken with them and interacted. Originally, Rees set out to study the clinical/physiological effects of bereavement including anorexia, weight loss, headaches, insomnia, tearfulness, and depression—the anomalous experiences came as an unexpected finding. Nevertheless, findings were consistent with earlier research with a sample of 72 young widows living in London, which found that 50% reported post-death experiences relating to their dead spouse.

For many participants, this was the first time they had spoken openly about such experiences; only 27.7% of participants had previously discussed their exceptional experiences (EEs) with anyone, and just 14.6% had told more than one person. No one attempted to approach their doctor and only one person sought advice from a clergyman. Although some did not share their experiences because they believed that others would be uninterested or potentially upset by them, approximately half the sample believed that they would be ridiculed, reinforcing the impression that such experiences are stigmatized. This reticence acts as a hindrance to research into the effects of anomalous experiences upon the bereavement process.

The incidence of such hallucinations was not associated with psychological abnormalities or medication, nor did they vary by age, sex, cultural, or religious background of the bereaved, or with the suddenness of death of their loved one. Experiences however, were significantly more likely in the first ten years following bereavement than after this period. People who reported having a long and happy marriage, and who had children, were more likely to experience hallucinations than the surviving spouse of an unhappy marriage. Finally,
and contrary to expectation, people with professional jobs or managerial positions were more likely to have post-death experiences during bereavement. Taken together, these findings suggest that hallucinations during bereavement are common and quite normal experiences.

Haraldsson has documented the incidence and forms of apparitional experience in a number of surveys and case collections. The research initially aimed to investigate how soon after death people begin to experience apparitions relating to the deceased, and later the nature of such experiences was explored. Participants were originally asked: “Have you ever perceived or felt the nearness of a dead person?” Haraldsson found that from an analysis of 337 accounts of post-death experiences, 50% occurred within the first year, 72% within four years, and 82% within ten years. Around a third of participants reported that they had only ever had one anomalous encounter with their deceased spouse. Additionally, it was noted that widows and widowers are more likely to report such an experience than people who have lost a friend or non-spouse loved one. The experiences were described as seeming very real to them, with 29% experiencing the sense of being touched by the deceased, whereas in similar studies this figure was only 11%, and this was interpreted as a sign of the strength of the attachment and intimacy they shared in life.

Dream Encounters

There have been numerous accounts of people interacting with the dead in their dreams. For example, Barrett carried out a content analysis of dream accounts regarding the dead and organized experiences into four categories of interaction in which the dead: (1) described their death to the dreamer/bereaved, (2) delivered a message, (3) sought to return to life through the dream, and (4) gave the loved one a chance to say “goodbye.” Tanous and Gray pointed out how real such dreams of the dead can seem, giving the dreamer the chance to interact with them in a “virtual reality”, particularly to bring closure or resolution where they did not have the chance to say goodbye in the waking state, or had parted on bad terms before the death occurred. One such account of a dream encounter taken from the research of Devers concerns a woman called Katie whose partner died in a climbing accident, such that she never had the chance to say goodbye in person:

The most vivid [visitation] dream I had was a couple of nights after he had died. It took place in the mountains, in a spot he loved. In the dream
he knew he was dead, and I knew he was dead. It was an opportunity for him to talk to me. He very much wanted to make sure I was okay and to reassure me that he was going to be okay. He let me know that his death had been quick and he did not suffer... Though he didn’t say it, I knew I wouldn’t see him again. This was sad but I also knew he was with me spiritually and that I would be reunited with him after I died. We didn’t talk much, but I felt his love. We looked at each other, and he took my hand. I could almost feel it. Then somehow we both knew it was time for him to go. He gave me a tender smile that melted my heart. It was sad and wonderful at the same time. Then I just dissolved into the darkness of sleep. That dream gave us time together. It was a beautiful way to say goodbye.

Devers refers to such dreams as being a powerful vehicle in processing grief, allowing the bereaved to feel more at peace following the experience. Unlike everyday dreams, Wright found that dreams involving interaction with deceased friends or loved ones were remembered in detail and had a lasting impact upon them:

It’s like you’re in the physical realm. I dream all the time but the minute I wake up I never remember my dream. I mean, they just pass and if I could remember little portions of them I can never put them all together and I can’t really remember details. In [bereavement] dreams I can remember details. I can visually see them. And I can recall the feeling of the touch when [my late husband] put his arms around me. And each time after I woke up, I felt a glorious, deep sense of peace... The experiences are extremely intense. I mean, they’re just as though the person is right there and it’s happening. I mean it’s very, very intense. And very wonderful when they happen, I might add. There’s never been a negative effect from it. I’ve never had an experience of impending doom or warning or anything. Always been a very positive kind of thing.

**Electrical and Physical Disturbances**

Another class of phenomena that is interpreted as communication with the deceased involves objectively verifiable physical disturbances, usually at locations that were familiar to the deceased. Wright discusses cases that might be collectively labelled as psychokinetic (PK) phenomena, in which the bereaved reported, for example, movements of objects in the home and electrical disturbances produced with no obvious cause. These physical effects may not be hallucinatory in nature, given that on occasion phenomena have been recorded or heard by multiple witnesses. Although the ontology of these physical effects
remains unclear, the experient typically regards them as a sign of continued survival or an attempt at communication from the deceased, which promotes a sense of a continued bond with the deceased for the bereaved.

Wright describes her own experience of a reading lamp that belonged to her late husband, which began to flicker immediately following his death in a manner that seemed responsive to requests or instructions. A similar experience was reported by Randall following the loss of his partner. In both cases the electrical items were checked thoroughly, and found to be in perfect working order. Wright commented on the personally symbolic meaning of the phenomenon:

This particular mode of communication was especially dramatic not only because the lamp was associated with him personally but because the lamp’s behaviour seemed to tell us this man, who had gone totally blind, now once again could tell light from dark—he could see again. Some part of him had indeed survived

One form of physical disturbance that particularly captures the symbolism of communication involves the telephone. Rogo and Bayless collected fifty accounts of strange telephone calls with the majority purporting to be from the dead. One such case is as follows:

My daughter Eileen…died in Montgomery County Hospital, Sandy Spring, Mayland, around 9:30 a.m. on November 12, 1969, from cancer of the lungs. She died on the first anniversary of her wedding, November 12, 1942, in Washington, D.C. Her funeral was set for Wednesday or Thursday the same week. I was at her sister’s home just outside of Damascus. Around 6:00 a.m. the telephone rang and I answered. It was a faint voice which I recognized as Eileen and it asked for Ann [her sister] and I could hear faint sounds in the background…By the time Ann reached the phone the voice faded but the line stayed open until we hung up. This was the morning of the funeral. (61)

In a follow up study, Cooper found that 30% of his cases occurred during periods of bereavement and typically while that person was alone. Other cases involve the telephone constantly ringing but when answered the line is dead or only static is heard. Anomalous calls ostensibly from the dead outweighed those ostensibly from the living by a ratio of 7:1. It seems clear that the experiences have an enduring effect on the experient. Krippner has pointed out that although research into anomalous experiences during periods of bereavement might be
regarded as controversial, it is essential in providing reassurance to experiencers that their experience is quite common—particularly with regard to telephone occurrences—and is not associated with mental health concerns. Such experiences appear to inspire hope, through emphasizing a continuing bond with the deceased.  

**Sought Post-Death Experiences**

Aside from the spontaneous post-death experiences during bereavement, some experiences have been ‘induced’ in order to explore what effect they have on the bereaved within a controlled setting. This has led to preliminary explorations and theories as to the importance and reasons why people have such experiences, and in what way(s) they might be beneficial. One popular approach utilizes a technique derived from the ancient Greek and Egyptian art of “scrying,” a method of divination involving staring into a shallow pool of water under low lighting conditions. This is alleged to produce a concentrated and relaxed state (or altered state of consciousness) that gives rise to visionary experiences including apparitions that were interpreted as messages of wisdom from divine beings regarding the future of humankind. Presenting the percipient with a homogeneous unchanging sensory environment represents a form of sensory habituation and has been found to shift attention away from external sources and to encourage internally generated imagery. The imagery may be sufficiently rich for the scryer to be able to interact with it and seek advice or guidance, much as a lucid dreamer might interact with their quasi-autonomous dream environment.

The modern-day equivalent is known as the “psychomanteum” or “apparition booth” and involves a darkened room containing a large mirror, angled so that it does not directly reflect the percipient’s image. Participants who have been bereaved will sit in the psychomanteum for some time, and when sensorially habituated, may report visions of their deceased relatives. Raymond Moody conducted over three hundred such trials and has found that where encounters are reported they tend to be regarded as very positive experiences that were beneficial in alleviating grief. Moody adopted stringent criteria when screening prospective participants, who had to (1) be mature, (2) not suffer from any form of mental illness, (3) eschew occult ideologies that could complicate the results, and (4) be emotionally stable, inquisitive, and articulate. Many were known to the researchers, and included counsellors, psychologists, medical doctors, graduate students, and professionals
in other fields. Results indicated that the psychomanteum could be a highly useful tool for healing grief that brought new insight into people’s lives and facilitated transpersonal growth. Hastings found a significant reduction in negative feelings associated with bereavement (longing, depression, anger) for those who had encounters in the psychomanteum \((n = 100)\). Sixty-three percent of the sample had had spontaneous post-death experiences in their day-to-day lives. The intervention also involved writing exercises, interviews, and art work focusing on the deceased person. Thus the study combined the psychomanteum with forms of counselling and creative tasks.

The Impact of Post-Death Experiences on the Bereaved

We have seen that spontaneous exceptional experiences involving “encounters” with the deceased are relatively common and that the experient often considers them to be evidence of a continuing bond. The attempts to induce such experiences noted above also presume a beneficial effect for the bereaved. However, we have also noted that “successful” bereavement typically involves a process of letting go so as to prevent stagnation and encourage the establishment of new attachments. In this section we will consider in more detail the assessments of the impact of post-death experiences among the bereaved.

In Rees’s studies discussed earlier in this chapter, 82.4% of respondents found their experience comforting and helpful, with only 5.9% rating it as unpleasant, although 25.5% found them neither helpful nor unpleasant. Drewry interviewed seven participants who had collectively reported around 40 instances of post-death experiences and alleged communication with the dead. Eight themes to their experiences were found, including that participants initially believed themselves to be delusional before deciding that the experience was genuine, with cues in the experiences that confirmed for them that the encounter was with their deceased friend or relative. After the experience, the percipients reported relief, comfort, encouragement, forgiveness, love, joy, and most notably hope. They were found to have reframed their views of the world since their experiences; this included the values by which they chose to live their life and their views on religion and life after death. Participants also felt a continued bond with the deceased, which was helpful when it came to coping with their loss. Experiences were considered beneficial, even if they were initially frightening.
Krippner argues that anomalous experiences surrounding death can be very therapeutic, although measures of that well-being shift have tended to be subjective and inconsistent. However, some research has been more systematic in using standardized measures, such as the Subjective Units of Distress Scale (SUDS). The SUDS uses a 0 to 10 response scale, with 0 representing no disturbance and 10 representing highly disturbing. Participants with a score of 8 or more may constantly feel depression, sadness, guilt, dizziness, anxiety, loss of control, pain, and other negative emotional and bodily sensations associated with trauma and bereavement. Hogan looked at changes in SUDS before and after participants had received a form of therapy called Guided Afterlife Connections, in which the bereaved is helped to form a connection with the dead through induced hallucinatory experiences. The study found that helping the bereaved to experience and bond with the dead on a sensory level dramatically reduced SUDS scores. Participants’ responses to the intervention included: “I feel like mom is always around me now”, “I feel calm and relaxed. I felt her saying the words. I felt her presence like when I’m dreaming” and “This was the most profound experience of my life”.

Nowatzki and Kalischuk examined the grieving, mourning, and healing process in relation to people who had reported post-death encounters. Semi-structured indepth interviews were carried out with twenty-three individuals who reported having had post-death encounters following the loss of a loved one. A phenomenological analysis showed that in making sense of their experiences, participants had shifted their attitudes toward life and death, and their opinions of life after death, but especially reported a positive impact on their grief. The healing aspect of such encounters reflected the feeling of a continued bond with the dead. Similar research by Steffen and Coyle explored how sense-of-presence experiences are interpreted by the percipient and what impact it has on them. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve participants and three themes emerged: (1) finding benefit in the possibility of survival beyond death, (2) finding benefit in a continued bond with the dead, and (3) making sense of the experiences through personal worldviews, plus spiritual and religious viewpoints. To make sense of the experience further, they adopted spiritual and religious frameworks, where it suitably accommodated the experience they had.

The adaptive grief outcomes of post-death experiences were investigated by Parker, in which twelve people were interviewed who had been bereaved within the preceding year. The patients were screened
so as not to include persons with signs of mental illness. Eleven participants experienced positive changes such as personal and/or spiritual growth. Parker concluded that the experiences were not due to any form of psychopathology, but were interpreted as serving “needs” of the bereavement process, especially when the experiences were considered to be veridical in nature. Murray and Speyer investigated exceptional experiences of the bereaved in both the United Kingdom and New Zealand, and argued that the bereaved must discuss such experiences to help coping and recovery, since dismissal of the experiences, either subjectively or as part of ongoing counselling, only added to their sense of isolation and depression. They argued that such experiences can contribute to spiritual and psychological healing if they can be presented and discussed respectfully.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that bereavement can be a complex and life changing emotional experience, which can be accompanied by various negative psychological and physiological side effects if prolonged. However, it has become evident—thanks to research conducted over the last century—that anomalous experiences can occur as a natural part of the bereavement process, and these can be beneficial for coping and recovery. Whatever the ontological status of such experiences, they allow the bereaved to assume a continued bond with the deceased and can be a medium for closure or resolution. With this in mind, we would argue that there is a need for greater recognition of their occurrence by therapists and acknowledgment of their potential for healing as part of the therapeutic process.

Notes


49. Krippner, *Getting Through the Grief*.
51. Ibid., 79.
One way that humans respond to the inescapable reality of death is to deny death’s finality. Ever since ancient times, individuals have reported visionary experiences of an afterlife. In postmodern American culture, many people demonstrate keen interest in narratives of near-death experiences (NDEs). This interest can be elucidated by examining one particular narrative that captured the popular imagination—bestselling “nonfiction” book and Hollywood movie *Heaven Is for Real* (2010; 2014). This story’s commercial success is noteworthy in a culture in which the rise of atheism has challenged an earlier consensus that there is life after death, and in which growing toleration of non-Christian religions has undercut the Bible’s once-authoritative status to shape popular concepts of heaven, hell, and the necessity of faith in Jesus for eternal salvation. This chapter contextualizes *Heaven Is for Real* within a larger history of American interest in NDEs, and uses the methods of close reading, comparison with other NDE narratives, and analysis of popular reactions to explain the exceptional popularity of this particular account.

*Heaven Is for Real* tells the story of a three-year-old boy, Colton Burpo, who in 2003 underwent emergency surgery once doctors realized that his appendix had burst five days before. The book’s author, Colton’s father Todd Burpo, is pastor of Crossroads Methodist Church in the small farming community of Imperial, Nebraska. Colton’s recovery surprised doctors who had not expected him to live, but even more surprising was the story that Colton would tell of what happened...
while he was near death. Several months later, four-year-old Colton announced to his parents, Todd and Sonja, that he had sat on “Jesus’ lap” and “angels sang” to him during an out-of-body experience. Colton’s parents came to believe him because Colton demonstrated that he knew things that he “couldn’t possibly know” about what his parents were doing during the surgery and about deceased relatives.¹

Colton’s story unfolded gradually through a series of short conversations with his parents over the next several months, some details emerging as long as three years later. Colton claimed to have visited heaven and caught glimpses of hell and Satan (but seemed extremely reluctant to talk about the latter), and to have met God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and biblical heroes such as John the Baptist, Mary, and the angel Gabriel. Colton added concrete details not in the Bible—such as the wings, halos, and colorful clothing that adorn people, and the presence of numerous children and animals, including a rainbow-colored horse that only Jesus rides. Angels use swords to police heaven’s boundaries since “Satan’s not in hell yet.” Colton also foretold a coming war that is “going to destroy this world”; Christians, including Colton’s dad, will have to fight, but “Jesus wins” and “throws Satan into hell.”²

Near-Death Experiences in Modern and Postmodern America

The term “near-death experience” is of modern origin, though deathbed visions and other mystical experiences of heaven and hell have been reported throughout recorded history. Psychiatrist Raymond Moody (M.D., Ph.D.) coined the term NDE in his 1975 bestseller, Life after Life, which sold over thirteen million copies, with translation into at least twenty-six languages. Interest in what if anything lies beyond the grave is not remarkable, given the inevitability of death for everyone. Since the late twentieth century, there has, however, been more-than-usual public conversation about NDEs. Bestselling books, internet articles, films, and scientific research studies have proliferated in the modern and postmodern eras. An Amazon.com search for “near-death experience” run on December 15, 2014, yields 46,360 hits, and a Google search 32,000,000 results.³

Ever since Moody named the NDE phenomena, people have become increasingly likely to identify their own experiences as fitting within this new category. A 1982 Gallup poll concluded that 15% of American adults, 23 million people, had had a “close brush with
death,” and 34% of this group, 8 million people, had “some kind of mystical encounter” at the time. A 1992 Gallup poll raised the estimated number of NDEs to 13 million. A 1997 *U.S. News & World Report* poll similarly reported 15 million NDEs. Pediatrician Melvin Morse’s research on children suggests that as many as 70% of children who come close to death have a NDE. The Near-Death Experience Research Foundation directed by oncologist Jeffrey Long estimates that on any given day 744 Americans have a NDE.4

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) exerted an enormous influence on modern ideas about the limits of human knowledge. Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) denied the possibility of directly experiencing reality. Twenty-first-century Americans live in an age marked both by modern philosophical insights and technological achievements and by a postmodern propensity to evaluate individual experience and narrative as offering unmediated access to what is really “real.”5

The NDE narrative is in one sense a product of modernity. One needs modern technological means and criteria to determine the precise timing of a person’s death, to perform life-saving surgeries or resuscitate clinically dead patients, and to disseminate narratives of such experiences through the technologies of print and newer media. Many, perhaps most, NDEs occur in a modern hospital setting amid medical interventions to postpone death.

Compared with past centuries, fewer people die at home, surrounded by family, with their senses unimpaired by narcotic pain medications and sedatives, and fewer dying people describe deathbed visions. Yet, with the rise of modern resuscitation techniques, more people report out-of-body experiences hovering above high-tech hospital tables and visiting heaven or hell while clinically dead or unconscious. Given rising life-expectancies paired with chronic health problems, more Americans live long enough, in poor enough health, to more actively contemplate death and dying.

NDEs are postmodern in that they express dissatisfaction with the limits of modern medicine. Indeed, NDE narratives often highlight the failures as well as the successes of medical technologies. NDEs typically occur when sophisticated technologies fail to keep someone from dying or almost dying, then succeed in temporarily rescuing the patient from the grip of death, yet seemingly cannot account for mystical experiences that occur in the interim.

NDE narratives reflect a certain epistemology, or way of knowing what is really real, that depends upon particular determinations of
what counts as evidence, the rules for interpreting what that evidence
means, and who or what is authoritative in making these determi-
nations. NDE narratives do not present scientific, philosophical, or
doctrinal evidence, but rather experiential evidence that life contin-
ues after death of the body. Authority is not vested in texts, learned
authorities, or doctrines, but, in the case of Heaven Is for Real, in
the simple language of a small child from a “normal” family in rural
America. Implicitly rejecting Kant’s philosophical musings as inade-
quate to account for extraordinary experience, Heaven Is for Real
revisits the biblical theme that a little child is best equipped to guide
the childlike along the path to truth.6 Such NDE narratives claim to
reveal knowledge of what Kantians say we cannot know based on
a kind of evidence that Kantians deny the possibility of having. The
assumption, for segments of even a post-Kantian world, is that there is
one reality that is the same for everyone, and it is sometimes possible
to access this reality through mystical experience.

Research on NDEs

Published studies of what are today termed NDEs began appearing in
the nineteenth century, alongside developments in scientific research
and print media. American geographer Henry Schoolcraft described
what now would be labeled an NDE in his 1825 book Travels in the
Central Portions of Mississippi Valley. Swiss geologist and Alpine
climber Albert von St. Gallen Heim published the first systematic
study of NDEs, “Remarks on Fatal Falls,” in 1892 (translated into
English in 1972). One bibliography of NDE studies lists 710 English-
language books published between 1847 and 1984; another identifies
thirty articles, by twenty-five different authors, published in Western
periodicals prior to 1975.7

Research on NDEs has accelerated rapidly since the mid-twentieth
century. Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s landmark book On Death
and Dying (1969)—which classified the now well-known five stages
of grief—broke a long-standing taboo on talking about death. For his
1975 bestseller, Raymond Moody conducted 150 interviews with peo-
ple reporting what Moody labeled NDEs, and identified fifteen elements
that may indicate a NDE (while noting that few narratives include all
fifteen). After additional interviews, Moody added four elements to
his list. This list, which has guided subsequent researchers, includes:
(1) Ineffability, (2) Hearing the news (of one’s death), (3) Feelings of
peace and quiet, (4) The noise, (5) The dark tunnel, (6) Out-of-body
Heaven Is for Real

experiences, (7) Meeting others, (8) The Being of Light, and often an angel, Christ, or God, (9) The life review, (10) The border or limit (beyond which one cannot return), (11) Coming back, (12) Telling others, (13) Effects on lives, (14) New view of death, (15) Corroboration, (16) A realm where all knowledge exists, (17) Cities of light, (18) A realm of bewildered spirits, (19) Supernatural rescues. Psychologist Kenneth Ring conducted the first controlled study of NDEs, *Life at Death* (1980), in which he isolated five stage of “the core experience”: peace, body separation, entering the darkness, seeing the light, and entering the light.” Drawing on Moody’s and Ring’s criteria, psychiatrist Bruce Greyson developed a sixteen-question scale to measure the depth of a NDE. The International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), founded in 1978, facilitated collaboration among a growing cadre of researchers and helped researchers to connect with individuals reporting NDEs. As a result of such efforts, researchers have since the 1970s interviewed thousands of American adults and children reporting NDEs.8

Research on NDEs is a highly charged topic because it raises fundamental questions about the nature of reality. Much published NDE research can be classified into three categories, based on the presuppositions and goals of researchers, categories that are for the purposes of this essay described as: New Age, scientific naturalist, and evangelical Christian. Some of the most influential researchers espouse explicitly New Age beliefs. For instance, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross affirms that “with the beginning of the New Age, more and more people are being given this gift and this knowledge.” Raymond Moody attests that he personally has had nine past lives. Kenneth Ring wields NDE narratives to argue that “humanity as a whole is collectively struggling to awaken to a new and higher mode of consciousness, which many have already called ‘planetary consciousness,’” and that NDEs make people more sympathetic to “Eastern religions” and the “essential underlying unity of all religions.” Such researchers have been criticized for underreporting “negative” NDEs, using unrepresentative subject pools recruited by advertisements or on a volunteer basis, asking leading questions about events that occurred decades in the past, and coding responses to support foreordained conclusions.9

As research sympathetic to NDE claims of “really” visiting heaven proliferated, so too did naturalistic explanations from researchers in the burgeoning fields of psychology, biomedicine, and neuroscience. Neurophysiological theories explain NDEs as hallucinations, and psychoanalytical theories as a physiological self-defense mechanism of an
ego that desperately wants to deny death. Hypothesized mechanisms include: oxygen deprivation, endorphin action, drug induction, temporal lobe seizures, or sensory deprivation of “metabolically disturbed brains” while losing or regaining “functional competence.”

Critics of reductionist theories note that some, but not all, features of NDEs can be artificially produced. Researchers can induce out-of-body sensations, seeing dark tunnels and bright lights, intense memories, spiritual awe, and hallucinations. Whereas hallucinations are generally disjointed and register on an electroencephalogram (EEG), NDE claimants often report exceptionally clear thinking, sometimes when EEG readings are flat, indicative of brain-death. Some NDE narratives include detailed descriptions of paradisiacal scenes and meetings with Jesus or deceased relatives, and third-party-corroborated claims of seeing or knowing things that the person had no readily explainable basis for knowing. One controlled study concluded that NDErs could describe CPR procedures more accurately than could those who underwent similar medical procedures but did not report an out-of-body experience. There are anecdotal claims of individuals during out-of-body experiences identifying the dress and activities of relatives in other locations who later confirmed the accuracy of the alleged observations, or noticing unusual objects—such as a worn tennis shoe on the outside ledge of a hospital window, or in another version of this account a shoe stuck in a corner of a hospital room—that were later purportedly found by investigators. Psychologist Susan Blackmore, who attributes NDEs to “instability in the temporal lobe,” oxygen deprivation, and drugs, concedes that “if these claims [of out-of-body observations] are valid then the theory I am developing is wrong—or, to be more accurate, inadequate.”

Disturbed by the implications of both New Age and scientific naturalist claims, evangelical Christians entered the public conversation. In Beyond Death’s Door (1978), Christian cardiologist Maurice Rawlings estimated that half the patients he resuscitated had NDEs, and roughly half of this group had hellish experiences. German evangelist Reinhard Bonnke disseminated a documentary film Raised from the Dead (2001) of a Nigerian man, Daniel Ekechukwu, who claimed to visit both heaven and hell during the three-day period when he was in a mortuary following a fatal car accident. The internet site “testimonies.com.au” publicized internationally the NDE narrative of a former Buddhist monk from Myanmar, Athet Pyan Shinthaw Paulu, who was avowedly dead for three days, during which time he saw a vision of heaven and hell, and received a revelation that Jesus is the only way
to salvation. Materialists criticize such accounts on the same grounds as New Age narratives, but New Agers also object to their exclusivist claims as reflecting a Christian bias.12

**Comparing *Heaven Is for Real* with other NDE Narratives**

Colton’s narrative includes at least nine of the nineteen common elements identified by pioneering NDE researcher Raymond Moody. These are: out-of-body experiences, meeting others, Christ, coming back, telling others, effects on lives, new view of death, corroboration, and a realm of bewildered spirits. Absent, however, are classic images of entering a dark tunnel with a bright light at the end. Compared with other NDE narratives, it is not unusual that Colton did not immediately tell his story. Research suggests that many people, especially children, who have had similar experiences may be reluctant to talk about them and may not say anything for years, until someone asks or allays fears of disbelief or ridicule.13

Previously reported children’s NDEs include some details similar to Colton’s, including veridical claims to know things they apparently had no way of knowing. Other children have reported talking with Jesus, seeing God on his throne, and even sitting on God’s “lap,” as well as meeting angels with wings. Other child experiencers have rejected storybook pictures of Jesus as inaccurate representations of what they saw in heaven. There are other children who claim to have met deceased grandparents who died before their births, and who were able to describe their appearances or recognize them from photographs they had not seen before. A two-year-old, Caroll Gray, who nearly died from hypothermia met a long-deceased grandfather and described in detail the pocket knife and gold watch he let her play with in heaven. Eighteen years later her mother discovered the grandfather’s missing will, in which he bequeathed the knife and watch (which the mother still had, but had not shown Caroll before her experience) to his granddaughter and namesake—although at the time of his death he had no granddaughter. Other children have reported meeting miscarried, aborted, deceased, or yet-to-be-conceived siblings.14

Some children have also described out-of-body experiences. Nine-year-old Katie was in a coma for three days after nearly drowning. According to her treating physician, Melvin Morse, Katie accurately described the appearance of her doctors and specific medical procedures
they performed while she was comatose with eyes closed. Katie claimed that an angel guided her through a dark tunnel to meet “Jesus and the Heavenly Father,” and that she was also allowed to wander through her house on earth. Katie shocked her parents by describing where each family member was, what they were wearing and doing, even supplying the detail that her mother was cooking roast chicken and rice.¹⁵

Given that *Heaven Is for Real* is not unique in narrating a child’s experiences or in its veridical claims, what explains the popular appeal of this particular narrative?

### Veridical Claims of *Heaven Is for Real*

*Heaven Is for Real* stands out among a large number of comparable accounts for the number and detail of veridical claims made by a young child. As the official “based on a true story” movie description phrases the appeal, “Colton recounts the details of his amazing journey with childlike innocence and speaks matter-of-factly about things that happened before his birth…things he couldn’t possibly know.” Todd’s repeated refrain in the book is that such a young child demonstrated knowledge of too many things that he “couldn’t have known” had the experience been a product of social conditioning, imagination, hallucination, or cognitive dysfunction. As Barnes & Noble buyer Patricia Bostelman phrased the presumption of innocence: “What was unusual about this book was that it was the story of a little boy. It deactivated some of the cynicism that can go along with adults capitalizing on their experiences.”¹⁶

Immediately after Colton’s surgery, he began to say and do a “string of quirky things” that, in retrospect, struck his parents as uncanny. Upon waking from the operation, Colton shouted for his father in order to tell him: “Daddy, you know I almost died.” Not wanting to scare Colton, no one had told him that he had been in danger of dying. Later overhearing his parents talking about how to postpone paying mounting bills, Colton announced that they had to pay the surgeon because “Jesus used Dr. O’Holleran to help fix me.” When Colton was scolded for not sharing toys with a friend, he agreed with his father’s chastisement because: “Jesus told me I had to be nice.” As a pastor’s son, Colton had often accompanied his father to funerals. But after his surgery, when Colton was taken to the funeral of an unchurched man whose religious beliefs were uncertain, Colton became visibly upset and demanded loudly: “Did the man have Jesus in his heart?...He had to know Jesus or he can’t get into heaven!”¹⁷
Four months after the surgery, Colton first spoke directly about seeing Jesus and angels. Colton also said he rose “up out of my body” to see the surgeon “working on my body,” as well as his father “in a little room” by himself praying, and his mother “in a different room and she was praying and talking on the phone.” Todd and Sonja confirmed the accuracy of Colton’s descriptions of their whereabouts and activities—and denied that anyone, including Sonja, had known where Todd was when Colton allegedly observed them.

Colton surprised Todd by asking, out of the blue: “Dad, you had a grandpa named Pop, didn’t you?” Pop had died thirty years before Colton’s birth. Colton claimed that he “got to stay with him in heaven,” and described Pop as “really nice” with “really big wings.” At the time of this conversation, Todd was uncertain whether Pop was in heaven because Pop never spoke of having a relationship with Jesus; two years later, Todd learned from an uncle that Pop had made a commitment to Christ in a revival service just two days before dying in a car accident at age sixty-one. Todd showed Colton a photograph of Pop taken shortly before his death, but Colton did not recognize him, explaining that “nobody’s old in heaven…and nobody wears glasses.” Todd’s mother later mailed a photograph of Pop taken at age twenty-nine that had been stashed in a storage box since two years before Colton’s birth. Todd showed Colton the picture, not saying who was in it, and Colton immediately asked: “How did you get a picture of Pop?” Colton did not, however, recognize his great-grandmother in the picture, even with prompting, although he had seen her in person just two months before.

Colton caught his mother, Sonja, off guard by one day declaring: “Mommy, I have two sisters,” followed by the question, “You had a baby die in your tummy, didn’t you?” When asked who told him that, Colton responded: “She did.” Colton also complained that this sister would not stop hugging him in heaven. In between the births of their daughter Cassie and son Colton, Sonja had had a miscarriage. She and Todd denied having ever spoken to Colton about it. Colton followed up by asserting that his sister was eagerly waiting for her parents to arrive in heaven so that they could give her a name. Todd and Sonja had not named their miscarried baby, not knowing that she was a girl. Colton also described his unborn sister as having dark hair (the color of Sonja’s hair), even though he and Cassie had blonde hair (the color of Todd’s hair).

Todd and Sonja asked Colton whether Jesus looked like pictures in storybooks and other popular portrayals. Colton rejected dozens of
different pictures as “not right”—implicitly challenging the assumption that Colton had been conditioned by his religious upbringing to imagine Jesus as looking a certain way. Finally, Todd showed Colton yet another picture, asking “What’s wrong with this one?” Colton paused before saying, “Dad, that one’s right.” The portrait, *Prince of Peace: The Resurrection*, had been painted by an eight-year-old Lithuanian girl, Akiane Kramarik, who had begun having visions of Jesus and heaven at age four. Born to an atheist mother who did not own a television or send her daughter to preschool, Akiane would not presumably have been socially conditioned to imagine Jesus in any way at all. Akiane’s remarkable artistic achievement—regardless of how one interprets the source of inspiration—is undeniably that of a child prodigy. *Heaven Is for Real* presents the agreement of these two children—from different cultures—in their images of Jesus as further evidence that Colton reported what he actually saw in heaven, not just what he imagined or hallucinated.

Colton’s descriptions of heaven, moreover, avowedly match biblical descriptions that Colton was too young to have encountered either by reading the Bible for himself, or through sermons, Sunday school, children’s books, or instruction at home. Colton described Jesus as having red “markers” on his palms and feet, though as Protestants it seemed unlikely that Colton would have seen a crucifix. When Todd tried to trip Colton up by asking where Colton went when it “got dark” in heaven, Colton gave the biblically consistent response that “it doesn’t get dark in heaven, Dad! Who told you that? . . . God and Jesus light up heaven.” Presuming the accuracy of biblical descriptions of heaven, Colton’s agreement with these descriptions supported the conclusion that he had seen heaven.

Critics, some evangelical Christians among them, instead attribute Colton’s account to the active imagination of a young child, or drug-induced hallucinations. Critics deny that Colton could not possibly have known the things he did, suggesting that he may have overheard more than his parents realized, and that he was drawn to an exceptionally skillful portrait of Jesus imagined by another child. Some evangelical critics deny that God gives “extra-biblical” visions of heaven, instead attributing Colton’s visions to “demonic deception.”

**Commercial Success of *Heaven Is for Real***

Arguing that heaven is for real is not a hard sell for many Americans. A 2007 Gallup poll reported that 81% of American adults believe in
heaven, 75% in angels, 70% in the devil, and 69% in hell. These figures reveal that many more Americans believe in heaven than in hell. A 2008 Baylor religion survey found that two-thirds of Americans have had at least one religious or mystical experience that they cannot readily explain in purely naturalistic terms. Yet, religiously exclusivist claims about who can go to heaven are less common. A 2007 Pew Research Religion & Public Life poll found that 65% of Americans believe that many different religious paths can lead to eternal salvation.

Although *Heaven Is for Real* does include religiously exclusivist claims—that one “can’t get into heaven” without knowing Jesus in one’s heart—it captured the American popular imagination. The 2010 book became a *New York Times* “#1 bestselling nonfiction paperback”—on the top-ten list for 206 weeks as of December 7, 2014, with sales passing the one million marker within two years, and translations into at least thirty-nine languages. The Burpos made media appearances on the NBC *Today Show*, CNN, *Fox & Friends*, as well as the Christian *700 Club*. The book’s publisher followed up with companion products: deluxe hardcover and movie editions, children’s versions—*Heaven Is for Real for Little Ones*, and *Heaven Is for Real for Kids*; a devotional reader, *Heaven Changes Everything*, to encourage Christians to live “every day with eternity in mind”; and a “DVD-based Conversation Kit” to facilitate evangelism. The book became the basis for a feature film in 2014.

It was not immediately evident that Colton’s story would become a bestseller. As Todd Burpo began talking about his son’s experiences, at first informally to friends and local churches, some Christians disbelieved the story or questioned his motives in telling it, whereas others thought it rang true and felt encouraged in their faith and strengthened in coping with life’s challenges. A pastor friend introduced Burpo to an agent, Joel Kneedler, with the Christian literary agency Alive Communications, who sold the title to the major Christian publisher Thomas Nelson (acquired by HarperCollins Christian Publishing in 2012). Thomas Nelson’s vice president Matt Baugher explained the press’s interest in the book: “We all are perhaps desperate to know what is on the other side of the veil after we die…This was a very down-to-earth, conservative, quote-unquote normal Midwestern family. We became fully convinced that this story was valid. And also that it was a great story that would just take off.” Burpo received writing help from professional author Lynn Vincent, who already had several *New York Times* bestsellers under her belt.

*Heaven Is for Real* is not the first NDE narrative, nor even the first NDE narrative with an explicitly evangelical Christian message, to
achieve bestseller status. Don Piper’s *90 Minutes in Heaven* (2004)—which recounts a Christian pastor’s visit to heaven after being pronounced dead in a car crash—became a *New York Times* bestseller and has more than four million copies in print. Another *New York Times* bestseller is Eben Alexander’s *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife* (2012). The book *23 Minutes in Hell* (2006), though not strictly a NDE narrative since its real-estate-agent author was nowhere near death at the time of his vision, also ascended *New York Times* bestseller charts.²⁵

The popularity of narratives describing heaven and hell as real places contrasts sharply with the virtual neglect of these subjects in modern American sermons. Heaven and hell were once staples of sermons and devotional literature. But in today’s market-oriented, “seeker-sensitive” religious culture in which pastors must compete for parishioners and their tithes, many pastors have concluded that American audiences, church members included, do not want to hear someone preach at them that they must repent from sin or believe in Jesus alone to escape judgment and hell and gain entrance to heaven. Yet, the same audiences who reject hellfire and damnation preaching crave hearing about personal experiences of the afterlife, even if these stories imply that heaven is reserved for those who place their faith in Jesus and that hell awaits those who do not. Colton’s story confirms the popular hope that heaven must be “for real” if a little child was able to visit and provide detailed descriptions of what he experienced.²⁶

**Retheologizing the Book for Hollywood**

Between the 1970s and early 2000s, Hollywood filmmakers generally avoided Christian subjects. Attempting to fill the gap, evangelical filmmakers distributed low-budget productions for screening in churches, Sunday Schools, and homes. *Heaven Is for Real* is one of several movies that major Hollywood producers targeted to Christian audiences in 2014. Other titles include *Noah, Son of God, God’s Not Dead, Persecuted*, a remake of *Left Behind*, and *Exodus*—leading Fox News to ask: “Is 2014 the year of the Christian film?”²⁷

*Heaven is for Real* the movie was strategically released Easter weekend—symbolic of the central event of the Christian metanarrative—thereby suggesting that the Christian hope of resurrection is, like the film, an “incredible true story.” Hollywood giant Sony pictures spent $12 million in production, recruiting mainstream director Randall Wallace (of
Braveheart and Secretariat) and major actors such as Oscar-nominee and Emmy award-winner Greg Kinnear. The film grossed $22.5 million opening weekend and $91 million by August 8, 2014.28

The film follows the book’s storyline relatively closely. Differences reflect more than the inherent challenge for book-to-film transitions of condensing the story and keeping it moving. The movie replaces the book’s exclusivist religious claims with universalism. Gone is any reference to hell, Satan, or the necessity of having Jesus in one’s heart to enter heaven. The movie omits the funeral scene in which Colton worries about the salvation prospects of an unchurched man. The movie rewrites two related scenes. In the film, Colton reassures Todd that Pop is in heaven even though no one had heard Pop ask Jesus into his heart; gone is the book’s addendum that, unbeknownst to Todd and Colton when they spoke, Pop was observed committing his life to Jesus just before his death. In the book, Todd assures a woman who lost a stillborn baby that God loves her child as much as the Burpo’s miscarried child, thereby encouraging her to hope that the child is in heaven. The film portrays a similar conversation—but this time between Todd and the mother of a grown son who died in war before confessing faith in Jesus, thereby implying that adults can go to heaven, whether or not they are confessing Christians, by virtue of God’s universal love. The movie targets both the 81% of Americans who believe in heaven and the 65% of Americans who reject exclusivist claims of who can get there. The film also adds explicit references to near-death experiences—showing Todd Googling this term and the term hallucination, and visiting a skeptical researcher who offers naturalistic explanations for NDEs, including out-of-body veridical claims. The film replaces the book’s confident assertions of the reality of heaven with the Burpo’s and their church’s struggle against nagging, scientifically informed doubts.

Reader and Viewer Responses

Popular reactions to Heaven Is for Real can be glimpsed through a review of online forums. Amazon.com reported, as of December 15, 2014, an average customer review of 4.5/5 out of 12,652 customer reviewers, with 9,733 awarding five stars. A Christian pastor who reviewed the book insisted on his initial skepticism—given the proliferation of “unbiblical” NDE narratives; Heaven Is for Real won him over both because this account was “surprisingly biblical” and because it included so many, apparently corroborated, veridical claims: “How could this
little boy...know things he’d never been taught and couldn’t know?” Other favorable reviewers were impressed by the “pure innocence of the four year old” and the “straightforward honesty” of the writing style.\(^9\)

The book may have been less successful in convincing non-Christians that heaven is for real, and that Jesus is the only way to get there, than in assuaging the doubts of Christians. Skeptics found the book “not very convincing or interesting” and “refuse to believe that it actually happened.” Christians predisposed to believe the story gained confidence in their beliefs: “Have always believed that Heaven is Real—now I’m convinced.” As another reader elaborated, “Christian believers will be the first to tell you we all doubt and wonder. We read the Bible and we have hope and faith in our lives, but we are all human. We all have moments of doubt where we wonder about it all. Reading this book really has grounded me and brought heaven to life for me.” The miscarriage scene particularly impressed some readers: the book “did bring me comfort about my miscarriage I had in 1974”—forty years in the past.\(^30\)

People who loved reading *Heaven Is for Real* eagerly anticipated the release of the movie. Prerelease online comments expressed the sentiments, “I will pay any amount to see this movie,” “I like NEED to go see the movie,” “my life is made!” Post-release “movie buzz” remained favorable: “Heaven is For Real was an amazing and touching movie #lovedit #heavenisreal,” “great movie indeed,” “still my fav movie.” The movie review website Rotten Tomatoes reports that 67% of respondents rated the film at 3.5 stars or higher (58,034 users gave an average rank of 3.8/5), though only 46% of “Approved Tomatometer Critics” (80 total) gave the movie a positive review. The aggregator website Metacritic reported “mixed or average reviews,” citing a user score of 4.5/10, based on 80 ratings, and a metascore of 47, based on 27 critic reviews. Many readers who loved the book also liked the movie. Some reviewers approved the movie’s “inclusive, positive message,” and gave the movie “brownie points for boldly flying in the face of conventional Christian doctrine, raising further spiritual questions about the Afterlife more than preaching scripture down to audiences.” Other Christian reviewers lamented the “missed opportunity to present the gospel to the millions.”\(^31\)

**Functions of NDE Narratives**

There is necessarily a distinction between what people, including Colton Burpo, experience and how their experiences get narrated. Experiences are by their nature individual, subjective, transitory, and un-sharable
in unmediated form. Narratives are constructed subsequent to experience and can only imperfectly communicate experience. Narratives are, moreover, collaboratively created through implicit references to prior social experiences (often mirroring narrative conventions of previous NDEs and popular assumptions about what lies beyond death), as well as ongoing exchanges between individuals and their audiences (including family, researchers, publishers, and filmmakers). Narratives are made more stable (or seemingly “objective” or “real”) through the processes of retelling, recording, and disseminating accounts, and may evolve through those processes.32

Narratives not only describe, but also interpret the meaning of experiences. Accounts categorized as New Age privilege positive feelings of peace, love, and nonjudgmental life review to propound a universalistic message that people of all religions will similarly experience a happy afterlife. Research by scientific naturalists domesticates subjectively supernatural experiences within materialistic explanations of brain malfunction. Evangelical Christian narratives promote fear of divine judgment and hell and hope of heaven for those, and only those, who place their faith in Jesus. As one online editorial review of Heaven Is for Real said of the book’s message, “Christians will be encouraged, non-Christians not at all.”33

People read (and watch films based on) NDE narratives because they are curious about whether there is an afterlife, and, if so, what it might be like. This is far from disinterested curiosity, since death awaits everyone. People may look to NDE narratives to alleviate fears of what lies beyond the grave or to confirm prior beliefs about the existence and nature of an afterlife (in which they have an individual consciousness and body) and/or God. Christians who already affirm belief in heaven and hell as core tenets of their faith may nevertheless struggle with doubts and want assurance that heaven is for real. Such assurances—including that hell awaits the ungodly—motivate Christians to live their lives now differently than they would otherwise, and assuage anxieties that they may be foolish for doing so. NDE narratives also provide consolation for loss of loved ones by anticipating heavenly reunions. A significant aspect of Heaven Is for Real’s appeal is that it offers hope to parents—and especially mothers—who have suffered the death of an unborn baby; the book suggests that God the Father has “adopted” these babies, and their earthly parents will one day get to meet them.34

Heaven Is for Real was not the first, and likely will not be the last, NDE narrative to captivate American audiences. People want to know what will happen when they die. In a postmodern culture, many people
turn to narratives of personal experiences—perhaps especially those of presumably innocent children—to supplement or replace the answers provided by clergy or scientists. Many Americans are more inclined to believe in heaven than in hell and prefer universalist to exclusivist religious claims. The popularity of *Heaven Is for Real*—the book—remains something of a puzzle precisely because it does assert the reality not only of heaven and Jesus, but also of hell and Satan, and it insists that Jesus is the only way to heaven. The movie version implicitly identifies these views as controversial by writing hell out of the story and encouraging hope that heaven is for real and awaits us all.

Notes

9. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, foreword to *Heading Toward Omega*, by Ring, 12; Raymond A. Moody, Jr., with Paul Perry, *Coming Back: A Psychiatrist Explores Past Life Journeys* (New York: Bantam), 11–28; Ring, *Heading Toward Omega*, 9, 146; Lee W. Bailey and Jenny Yales, *The Near-Death Experience: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1996). Although the term “New Age” is sometimes used in an overly general and pejorative manner, this essay adopts the term because it is embraced by the subjects described. Neither are the terms “scientific naturalist” nor “evangelical Christian” unproblematic, but they are useful shorthand for typological purposes. There are numerous studies that probe the definitions and limitations of each of these terms.


18. Ibid., xx, 60.

19. Ibid., 86, 89–90, 121–122.

20. Ibid., 66, 67, 104.


33. Amazon.com, “Editorial Reviews”: M.T.F.

Mystical Knowledge and Near-Death Experience

Lee Irwin

Introduction

There is inherent irony in the conceptual relationship between Near Death Experience (NDE) and the mystical: death is not normally the means by which an individual seeks mystical insights even if, in analogical language, death is a metaphor representing transformation. There is immediate tension in the suggestion that dying is a possible condition for certain types of mystical knowledge, or a necessary circumstance for life-changing perceptions. The major proviso for such knowledge is that the individual not die but return to life animated with a new vision of what-is. This tension between near death and a return to altered life is rarely mediated by choice—who would choose physical death as a means for mystical knowledge? And yet, the literature clearly illustrates that dying persons have NDEs that are highly transformative, even transcendent, so in a very basic sense, death is not prohibitive of mystical knowledge. By death, I am referring to the clinical descriptors of death: no heartbeat, no respiration, no eye-reflex, no measureable brain activity. However, dying is a process, a dynamic series of biological stages and degrees of subtle loss and increasing paralysis, which may, under optimal circumstances, be halted and result in revival and resuscitation. It is this in-between phase of neither fully alive nor fully dead that provides an opening to alternate landscapes whose transphysical contours suggest a much more vast and
complex realm of human perceptions than currently recognized by normative physicalist accounts of embodied awareness.

The context of the “in-between” as a dynamic process of unfolding perception mediated by death represents a primary condition for unique types of visionary knowledge. An adjunct to such knowledge is the frequent reference to “extra corporeal perception” (ECP), more popularly referenced as “out-of-body experience” (OBE), representing a primary locus of awareness in the in-between state.¹ As a phenomenological construct, I regard ECP as denoting a dynamic process in which a “nonphysical self” emerges, informed by a discreet identity or psychonoetic consciousness, with heightened qualities of perception, which result in memorable impressions that can be recalled at will by a resuscitated individual. The nonphysical self can take diverse forms, like a sphere, but the most common form is the current body-image. The process of encounter with the “after-death” perceptual domain can be bracketed into three stages: the crisis stage of dying leading to apparent unconsciousness; measurable death and loss of evident life-signs during which the ECP occurs; physical resuscitation and a return to normative consciousness states. Under medical conditions, such as cardiac arrest, invasive surgery, childbirth, or life-threatening conditions, the NDE individual is observed by doctors, nurses, and technicians while attached to various devices that measure the person’s physical state. These measurements confirm clinical death and resuscitation. A rough estimate of frequency on NDE among the general human population is about 5%, which in America would be roughly fifteen million people.²

The explicit “after-death” perceptual domain is characterized descriptively as, at first, spatially congruent with the location of the nonliving body—the ECP begins in a space that seems identical to the physical space inhabited by the previously embodied individual. This ECP of spatial continuity often reflects a change in perspective: floating above the physical body, hovering near the ceiling, drifting about the room. This condition is accompanied by vivid, often enhanced perceptions of sounds, language, gestures, and motions made by others in that space. Cognitive functions are lucid and feelings are often intensified. However, the inhabited “space” is not simply three-dimensional, geometric space; it is primarily constituted as a perceptual field (ECP) whose complexity can take on many aspects of a transphysical nature, as indicated by the nonfunctionality of gravity and loss of substance mass and density. The postmortem body simulacrum, or reconstructed “self-awareness,” exhibits a freedom of movement and spontaneity
no longer limited by the dynamics of physical life. In the near-death context, the experient discovers a complex, layered, multidimensional domain capable of radical shifts, encounters, and interactions with others within a shifting, dynamic context that may manifest visionary contents that are unfamiliar, startling, and transformative.

The tendency in medical research has been to focus on the descriptive qualities of NDE with emphasis on the phenomenological character of the experience. The initial work on this phenomenology was first articulated by Ray Moody, who coined the phrase “near-death experience” and listed fifteen descriptive aspects of a composite NDE event where no single event necessarily had all characteristics. Since then, others have added to the list of characteristics, including negative NDE, while more recent research has tended to cluster various features into discreet categories, typified by Bruce Greyson’s well-known fourfold typology where the NDE event is analyzed according to cognitive, affective, paranormal, and transcendental features. Among the features listed, the most common are: a sense of separation from the physical body as a discreet mobile identity (OBE); enhanced cognitive abilities; intensification of feelings; lucid awareness of local physical surroundings; movement away from those surrounding, often into or through darkness (in a minor sense, a tunnel); encountering a non-ordinary realm inhabited by postmortem others, including relatives, friends, animals, and “beings of light” who are perceived as helpful and supportive; intense feelings of peace, calm, and joy; and in deeper NDE, a cosmic encounter with Light, God, or other manifestations of great ontological import for the experient. There may be a life review, an experiential sense of the impact and consequences of the experient’s thoughts, words, or actions on others, empathically felt by the experient; a recall of past lives or possible future events (precognition); telepathic communication with other beings, often characterized as teachers or guides; a decision to remain or return; and finally a sense of reversion to an embodied state, involving a dramatic shift in perspective to the physical body. The aftereffects of the encounter often result in positive and dramatic changes in personality and worldview.

Early researchers constructed their model around “core features” as representative of possible “universal” cross-cultural aspects of NDE while recent studies have tended to focus on discreet and specific aspects of the NDE event. In concord with Greyson’s four-part typology, researchers have emphasized certain “transcendental” features of the NDE. For example, Sabom classifies an experient’s perceptions of a being in a place or dimension other than the physical world as
“transcendental.” In a more elevated sense, Kenneth Ring writes that the NDE has the “power to thrust one into a transcendental state of consciousness whose impact is to trigger release of universal ‘inner programming’ of higher human potential, a latent spiritual core.” In 1999, Bruce Greyson called for “more precision in our definition of NDEs, and specifically for including a transcendental or mystical element in that definition.” Ring and Sharon Cooper, in their classic study of NDE among those born blind, claim that the ability of the blind to “see” during an NDE is a result of an intrinsic “transcendental awareness” that supports such seeing. In 2006, Greyson characterized his fourth typological NDE category of “transcendental features” as “reflecting apparent otherworldly phenomena, includes apparent travel to a mystical or unearthly realm or dimension, an encounter with a mystical being or presence, visible spirits of deceased or religious figures, and a border beyond which one cannot return to earthly life.”

Atwater, in summing up types of NDE among recorded accounts, notes 47% adults and 19% children reported “transcendental experience,” which she equivocates with “collective universality, expansive revelation, and alternate reality.” Greyson, who more than most researchers (along with Ring) has dedicated himself to articulating a concern for understanding the mystical aspects of the NDE, writes: “the sense of being in the presence of something larger than or transcendent of oneself, and the experience of a bright light or being of light are features common to both NDEs and mystical experience.”

In the 2009 review of 30 years of NDE studies, Janice Holden writes on the NDE as conceptualized in two distinctive ways: a material aspect where NDE experients note the features or activities of the physical world and the transmaterial aspect where the experient “perceives phenomena in transcendent dimensions beyond the physical world.” Holden seems to create a middle ground between physical and transcendent with her emphasis on transmaterial. In this same volume, Greyson, Kelly, and Kelly discuss a variety of “explanatory models” for NDE and specifically note the “transcendental model,” which they describe as “temporary separation from the physical body […] to some level of reality [that] transcends the ordinary physical world.” Michael Nahm, in discussing past life memories of children, notes that some children remember “entering a transcendental afterlife realm after having left their physical bodies. This realm contains several features likewise familiar from NDE accounts, such as meeting deceased friends, relatives, superior mystical beings, and, occasionally, experiencing a life review.”
In the recent *The Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality*, Greyson, while repeating his earlier assessment of the similarity of NDE and mysticism, *differentiates* NDE from mystical experiences in three ways: the persistence of individual identity; the clarity of perceived events [hyperlucidity]; and the lower frequency of union with the divine, which he notes as “a defining characteristic of mystical experience.” More recently, Natasha Tassell-Matamua adapted the language of Greyson’s “transcendental features” to include “seeing and being drawn to an unusually bright light, seeing and/or conversing with deceased relatives or a ‘being of light,’ and cosmic unity and a sudden understanding and connection with the universe.” In a very recent 2014 article, Greyson and Khanna observe that as a person approaches death his or her consciousness alters and generally passes through three sequential stages: “resistance to dying, surrender and life review, and finally transcendence, a culminating phase including features typical of spiritual or mystical experience.” In this study, they demonstrate that those who had NDE show greater spiritual growth than those who underwent a similar crisis without NDE and that “the degree of spiritual growth was positively correlated with the depth of the NDE.” The comparison here amplifies the connection between “transcendence” and positive spiritual growth and change in a post-NDE state.

**Problematizing Transcendence**

The use of terms such as “transcendent” and “mystical,” often in conjunction with each other in NDE research, reflects very little precision or historical accuracy in relationship to the larger field of research on mysticism in the comparative study of religions. However, the general methodology of NDE research has been to gather narrative reports from actual experiencers to form a variety of theories based on corroborated evidence, unrelated to historical precedence. The study of mysticism within the field of religious studies as a comparative discipline (not as “theology”) is theoretically dense and complex; most analysis is based on the writings of individual mystics or on sacred texts as aligned with a wide variety of traditional, often competing, schools of thought. Standing outside the participant perspective, scholars of comparative religions have added a second, analytic perspective to discourse on mysticism, and now, research narratives in near death and parapsychology are adding empirical data to the discussion. There is a rich and complex mix of concepts and sources, each bolstered by distinct research methodologies, all in search of an accurate account of both mystical and
near death experiences. However, in the general field of religious studies, there is, as Fox notes, a “deafening silence” among both theologians and historians of religion on near death research. Nevertheless, there are accounts in the NDE literature that correspond to very profound mystical descriptions as recorded by highly respected mystical authors.

Certainly Judith Cressy gives a credible comparative account of historical mystics, specifically Theresa of Avila and St John of the Cross, as exemplars within a Catholic Christian mystical tradition whose experiences resonate well with NDE accounts. But she is also cautious in drawing comparisons: “not all NDEs are spiritually similar and most NDEers have not attained the heights of spiritual consciousness [...] one mystical experience does not a mystic make.” In this same volume, Zaleski makes the point that “intention, preparation, understanding, techniques and communities for reintegration” for mystic individuals participating in a specific spiritual tradition differs radically from NDE experiencers who are often quite ordinary individuals with only modest conventional religious commitments and little communal support related to mystical states. Thus a question arises as to the relevance of tradition or training in relationship to mystical states, as differing from NDE, and the degree to which a religious practice might enhance or shape mystical experiences. Certainly it is true that within religious traditions, individuals may find community support and guidance to help mediate and interpret mystical events. However, it is also true that individuals within religious traditions have often faced censure and criticism based on the discontinuity between their actual experience and inherited traditions of faith and sanctioned, acceptable beliefs. Thus mystical experiences are negotiated within a traditional context and may differ radically from NDE accounts.

In the context of religious experience within the history of religions “mysticism” is a problematic category and as David Wulff (2004) writes, “mystical experience is a modern Western construction that possesses no settled meaning.” Leigh Schmidt interprets “mysticism” as “a category in disrepair” and shows how the concept was marginalized when first brought into Anglo-American discourse as a term “charged with the reproaches of misplaced sexuality, unintelligibility, pretension, and reason-be-damned extravagance.” Historically, the very idea of “mysticism” clashed with rational Enlightenment discourse and bourgeoning scientific attitudes. By the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of “mysticism” was reconstructed through assimilation into universalized, essential definitions, such as Alcott’s transcendentalist interpretation of mysticism as “the sacred spark that has lighted
Writers like Harvard theologian James Freeman Clarke, and more famously the psychologist William James, “made mysticism universal and timeless by turning it into solitary subjectivity and largely shearing it of distinct practices.” Abstracting the concept of mysticism from its immediate historical, cultural, and religious context resulted in a deconstructed theory of mysticism with no evident grounding in actual, lived social life. Mystical “experience” was valued only insofar as it supported an essentialist or perennialist perspective of a core, universal aspect of human experience, devoid of explicit socioreligious characteristics, practices, or disciplines that differentiated the various interpretations of such experience. However, this interpretive move to universalize mysticism supported liberal perspectives that valued mysticism as a counter-narrative in a social context increasingly burdened by “untrammeled naturalism and the fierce onward current of purely scientific thought.”

Throughout the twentieth century, the concept of mysticism continued to be a problematic concern and a deeply contested theory. The idealized view of mysticism as a universal phenomenon constructed around an ahistorical “core experience” has been severely challenged by contextual theories that view mysticism as inescapably conditional, relative, and socially constructed. For contextualists, all accounts of mystical experience are shaped in fundamental ways by the language, tradition, and sociocultural context of the mystic and further embedded in interpretations that reflect his or her time, place, and worldview. Thus there are multiple “mysticisms,” all context dependent, and no universal core mysticism. Contra this theory, are those that support a view of “pure consciousness” as a transsocial ontological depth known through deep experiential insights and where a lack of such insight indicates a less accomplished realization of mystical potential. Forman argues for a dualistic epistemological model of mysticism, not informed by language or context, but as a sui generis condition intrinsic to the depths of the human situation. His moderate dualism is a combination in double perspective of “a knowledge-by-identity of an empty, non-intentional [pure] consciousness along with an intentional knowledge of the world.” Thus the enlightened or illumined mystic participates in both a deep ontological unity consciousness and also in self-determined intentional, individual actions within the everyday world. This view is not the same as the earlier descriptive categories of universal attributes (“core experience”) but depends on deep immersion in empty “pure consciousness” freed of
all obscuring mental tendencies or social, core constructions, without subject–object separation, and not dependent upon sensory perceptions. In fact, Forman concurs with religious comparativist Ninian Smart who defined mysticism as “a set of experiences or more precisely, conscious events which are not described in terms of sensory experience or mental images.”

To clarify his position, Forman distinguishes between “visionary events” or ecstatic visions, images, auditory manifestations (and so on) and true “mysticism” arising typically from deep meditative states of calm, with low cognitive and physiological activity. This distinction is based on his own mystical insights and aligns, he claims, with Asian religious traditions. Forman also references Walter Stace’s distinction between “introverted and extroverted” mysticism, aligning visionary events with extroverted mysticism and pure consciousness with deep introversion. However, Forman criticized Stace for failing to distinguish between higher (dual awareness) states and lower states of simple introverted mysticism. Where both Forman and Stace agree is that in the penultimate mystical experience there is deep ontological, undifferentiated unity, indivisible from individual consciousness and inseparable from embodied human life. What these debates reveal is that mystical experience is not simple, not reducible to explicit “defining” or “universal” characteristics, and may best be described in terms of depth of experience and ultimacy of the transcendental realization. In turn, this suggests that mystical events are complex, socially conditioned, variable in “stages and states” (commonly referenced in many religious traditions), and may have highly idiosyncratic, contextual contents while also confirming inner properties of unity, coherence, and ontological completeness, often referenced as a single primordial source.

According to Jess Hollenback, all mysticism has two fundamental elements, a distinctive mode of experience and the individual’s response to that modality of the experience, that is to say, there is the experience and its interpretation. Emphasizing the need for comprehensive breadth, Hollenback assimilates indigenous religious traditions and a wide diversity of alternative examples into his insightful analysis of mysticism. In particular, he introduces the importance of the paranormal in mystical experience and the creative role of the imagination in shaping mystical experience through one-pointed concentration of mental and emotive attention. Further, he explores the relevance of visionary encounters (particularly of the great vision of the Lakota holy man, Black Elk) as deeply mystical phenomena of a certain “imaginal” mode of consciousness without discrediting or devaluing the
role of imagination in the process. Hollenback points out that within many mystical traditions, supernatural, or paranormal phenomena have often been discredited by advanced mystical practitioners as distractions and “lower order” phenomena in contrast to higher states of mystical union. This bias has carried over into research analysis by scholars of religion who often mimic the bias against paranormal phenomena in concert with recognized “insider” views or who discredit such phenomena based on a positivist bias that would reduce claims of supernatural knowledge, such as visions, to nothing more than hallucinations and false consciousness. However, Hollenback argues persuasively that supernormal insights and abilities are fundamental to certain spiritual traditions, particularly indigenous or shamanic religions, and that discrimination against the visionary imagination is a form of ethnocentric bias that fails to recognize the epistemological legitimacy of more sensory-oriented, visual traditions. Thus interpretations as distinct from, or possibly enfolded with, experience may carry deep bias, as in various “great” religious traditions and within scholarly analysis, that disempowers certain paranormal aspects of experience or fails to recognize the value and relevance of the paranormal within the context of a “higher” mysticism.

In Hollenback’s view, the origin of paranormal perceptions, visionary appearances, and mystical events are directly correlated with basic imaginal capacities of the healthy, normal mind (as in fantasy or dreams) and such events represent an amplification of natural abilities through an empowerment of attention leading to a wide range of mystical states. The distinction between normative and mystical is described as dependent upon “empowerment,” which Hollenback defines as a “metamorphosis of the imagination” through focused thought and will, developed through a wide variety of mystical techniques and contemplative practices. As noted by Zaleski, “preparation, understanding, and techniques” are crucial aspects of facilitating the mystical event and harnessing the imagination through meditative training, visualization practices, and other contemplative techniques is a methodology consistent with empowering the visionary ability. Such imaginal practice is also a medium for the development or activation of paranormal perceptions and abilities. Hollenbeck believes out-of-body visualization (OBE), or ex-stasis, is one of the most fundamental ways by which mystical abilities, such as vivid visionary and transphysical perceptions, are actualized. The “empowered imagination” thus becomes a means by which paranormal contents in ECP can be integrated into the mystical paradigms of diverse traditions.
Hollenback emphasizes that his thesis of the empowered imagination does not mean that mystical events are reducible to subjective imagination but rather that a trained imaginal ability is a key to unlock enhanced human perceptions that are veridical and intersubjective. The mystically empowered individual is capable of valid noetic perceptions whose contents are verifiable and participant in a larger field of shared significations in which information is shared between minds.\textsuperscript{43}

As can be seen from the preceding analysis, the issue of “transcendence” within the mystical context is quite complex and by no means reducible to a merely transphysical notion. If mystical experiences can be distinguished by types and stages of development, specifically within religious traditions, then the application of terms like “transcendence” need to be more nuanced, less deflated, and more consistent with the actual nature of the mystical event, not used to simply label out-of-body experiences, which are hardly noted within mystical traditions as indicating any profound mystical realization in themselves. As a staged event, similar to near-death events, the identification of mystical stages as characterized by increasingly enhanced human perceptions can lead to a culmination that is truly transcendent, transphysical, and, in some cases, transpsychic, beyond both body and mind. I certainly agree that NDE research has identified significant correlates between the basic core features of NDE and a variety of mystical accounts whose phenomenological descriptions correspond with a range of mystic states, perhaps best identified by the metaphor of “depth” experience. The metaphor of depth, or inwardness, has become a working construct in quantum physics, psychiatry, analytic, or transpersonal psychology, and other disciplines where “a deep level of subjectivity or pure spirit” is often postulated as inherent to all life, even on a planetary basis.\textsuperscript{44} The Dutch medical researcher Pim van Lommel differentiates between individuals who had a “moderately deep NDE, a deep NDE, and a very deep NDE.”\textsuperscript{45} This mapping strategy of stages of depth in near-death events may reflect deepening immersion in alternate domains identical with “empowered imagination” as well as “higher stages” of mysticism where “transcendence” has typically represented the highest or most refined realizations.

**An Alternative ECP Model**

In order to bring some clarity to the interpretive problem of mapping NDE accounts with comparative mystical traditions, as well as with trans-traditional accounts not identified with any particular religion,
I have constructed a relatively simple heuristic model. NDE empirical accounts offer a unique perspective on mystical literature and contribute significantly to debates over what constitutes “authentic” mystical experience. To avoid confusion, I have called this an ECP (Extra Corporeal Perception) model to distinguish it from the more descriptive, archetypal core models based on listing specific NDE traits. The ECP model is meant to be an interpretive model capable of providing references for various stages of NDE events without reducing the contents of those events to a particular philosophical or religious point of view. The source of this model is twofold: on the one hand it reflects my personal experience as an experiencer of one NDE event, as well as numerous OBEs and other paranormal perceptions; on the other hand it reflects many years of study and assimilation of mystical (and esoteric) theories within a wide variety of religious traditions East and West. It is a heuristic model, not empirical or in any way “scientific,” but strictly an interpretive model meant to give some context for assimilating a range of NDE events with an equally wide range of mystical topologies, many of which are far more complex and multidimensional than the model I am offering. The attempt is to simply provide a broad enough canvas to accommodate a variety of stages, painted in visual form, in order to demonstrate the complexity and range of experiences labeled “mystical.”

The model (figure 9.1) has three domains of “mysticism”—moving from the physical to the intrapsychic and then to the transcendent. Each sphere or circle represents an existential domain of perception: the physical body as the centered conscious self; the transphysical (OBE) paranormal self; and the trans-sensory higher self. Each sphere is contained or held within the next more subtle domain, the entire tri-dimensional structure held inclusively within what I have called “Absolute Beingness” as a primordial ground of sentient perception within which and through which all life communicates and coexists. The embodied self, fully incarnate in and through the physical body, has an internal, variable threshold (A), which represents subconscious or subliminal influences manifesting through spontaneous, undirected images, dreams, fantasies, and other imaginative and intuitive events. This subliminal domain, as articulated by the English psychic researcher Frederick Myers, was described as “all that takes place beneath the ordinary threshold, outside the ordinary margins of consciousness.”46 Myers also supported the idea that a “superconscious” aspect might reveal contents or abilities latent to ordinary conscious awareness, such that ordinary mind, by analogy, was like a small portion of the
visible electromagnetic spectrum and the ultraviolet region represented
the superconscious “upper horizon” or “higher evolutionary level.” Variable threshold A in the ECP model extends into the suprasensory
domain to represent the possibility of paranormal perceptions impacting the normal conscious state, through intuitions, dreams, and imagination. A useful concept is that of “transliminality” as articulated by Michael Thalbourne. He defines it as “the degree to which a threshold can be crossed. Persons high in transliminality will experience a much larger number of different types of input from subliminal regions, whereas others, lower in transliminality, may hear from that region on considerably fewer occasions.” A person’s transliminal sensitivity may be an index of creativity and responsiveness to “irruptions” from the subconscious or superconscious domains.

Sensory mysticism is a mysticism of the body, whose qualities are fully manifest in and through the body. Much has been written on religion and the body and an emergent perspective is that body-conscious experience may be fully mystical in a context of affirming embodied experience. While many religious traditions have denigrated the body
and praised asceticism, monastic life, and sexual repression as necessary conditions for the attainment of mystical insights, contemporary research on mysticism has revealed some rather startling facts. Jenny Wade has written extensively on her research with “ordinary” people whose sexual experience has led them to profound mystical states and realizations through sexual intimacy. Her research reveals that sexual experience is often the most common source of mystical experience for many people.\(^5\)

The point is that mysticism is not a phenomenon that is best described as intrinsically “transphysical” but may in fact engage empowered imagination through vital bodily, emotive arousal as a means to open to a more profound horizon of enhanced, even super-conscious, body-based perception. Many other examples of sensory mysticism could be delineated, such as Sufi dancing, intense shamanic drumming, various forms of aesthetic perceptions, artistic and creative activities, gospel singing, and so on. Sensory mysticism is an embodied base for accessing paranormal and higher cosmic perceptions that unfold through bodily actions and interactions with others.

The second domain is the active sphere of what I am calling the “paranormal self”—by which I mean that aspect of self capable of a range of psychic perceptions. The “big five” in paranormal research, according to Charles Tart, are: telepathy (mind to mind communication), clairvoyance (distant seeing), precognition (seeing the future), psychokinesis (moving physical objects with mind), and psychic healing.\(^5\)

Of course, the paranormal capacities are far more extensive than the “big five” and involve many diverse types of perception, including past-life memories, trance states, mediumship, levitation, bilocation, spirit guides, and of course out-of-body perceptions (OBE) and NDE. An OBE differs from an NDE in the sense that it does not require crisis or near death, and may occur as a creative act intentionally directed by the experiencer to bilocate into the suprasensory realm. As a person who has had numerous OBEs, I can say that what matters most is the domain of perception (as suprasensory), which is very much nonordinary. The so-called state of consciousness according to Tart of an OBE experiencer may mimic embodied perceptions in some ways, but in other ways whole vistas of perception can manifest, including the blunt and obvious fact that one is “flying about” with little or no effort! But flying about where? Here the domain of perception is across the “transphysical threshold” (B) where embodied, physical awareness is now seemingly liberated from strictly determined bodily senses.\(^5\)

And yet, the transphysical entity does mimic in deeply patterned ways, the bodily senses, though these can be heightened and remarkably clear
and far reaching as noted by Greyson’s category of enhanced “cognitive features.” However, is the projected OBE really “mystical” and if so, how or why?

Certain features of the OBE do correspond to transformations affirmed by mystics as a result of altered perceptions. For example, the experienc’s sense of time and space may shift dramatically. I note the shift in temporal awareness as a difference of duration and flow (ultra-temporal, not “timeless”). Time is not stopped; there is a lineal sense of happenings, one event after another, a lived-time no longer mechanically measured; duration may extend beyond the measureable span but it is still lived stage-by-stage. Space is more lucidly multidimensional and mobile (ultra-spatial). Experientially, movement is possible in “all directions” and includes access to visionary, supersensory (archetypal) contents, such that transliminal capacities are enhanced and a “visionary world” as a unique perceptual domain may manifest with incredible detail and vividness. Such a visionary world may correspond to religious beliefs or may be unique in terms of the social dispositions (constructions) of the experienc. Tart concludes his observations on OBE by saying that the phenomenon is complex and “messy”; he writes, “the mind may be, at least partially, really ‘out,’ located elsewhere than the physical body,” but an OBE “can be a simulation of being out of the body” and receive veridical information by ESP. OBE may be a combination of aspects, in which “a person is really ‘out’ in some sense but has a distorted perception of the OBE location, with dreamlike contents mixed in.”54 These dreamlike contents reflect the multidimensional aspects of the shift in consciousness, which is by no means participant in “ordinary space-time” and now manifests as perceptions that are rich with mental, emotive, and intra-subjective contents no longer constrained to physical world constructions. The “paranormal self” is that aspect of self capable of transphysical or extra-corporeal perceptions (ECP) operative in a more subtle, expansive information sphere that is rich with thought, feeling, images, worlds, and beings no longer limited to strict physical measure or assessment. In this sphere, empowered imaginal construction may manifest psychically sustained, often collective, “worlds” intended to represented belief systems and ideological commitments.55

More pointedly, NDEs provide the best examples of transphysical awareness as epitomized by ECP through intense, vivid perceptions in a nonphysical state, rich with paranormal aspects. Bruce Greyson’s third cluster of NDE features are paranormal or “psychic phenomena, such as extraordinarily vivid physical sensations, extrasensory perception,
recognitive visions, and a sense of being out of the physical body." 56 NDEs are the classic example of empirically evident paranormal perceptions, often providing veridical information attained when the physical body is measurably inert and clinically dead. While it is true that the NDE entity, which I call psychonoetic ("a knowing soul"), is active in the suprasensory world, such activity may not be "mystical" insofar as mysticism is defined as some higher form of perception or knowledge beyond the paranormal sphere. To paraphrase Cressy, a transphysical perception does not a mystic make. However, if we reject the hierarchical approach to mysticism, deconstructing the tendency to elevate certain types of knowledge or gnosis as superior forms of insight, and accept the relative claims made by genuine visionaries that paranormal perceptions are a legitimate stage of mystical development, then NDE paranormal perception may indeed be classified as mystical (as a stage, not as ultimate). This relative classification is contextual, however, and the question arises as to what cluster of features may constitute a more evident example of "deep" NDE perception. Further, there is the creative aspect of the imaginal capacity as manifest in the NDE state; what is perceived is not simply "given" as it may also be "created" as a legitimate aspect of psychonoetic imaginal construction. While NDE experients may narrate "core features," they may also be creative individuals even in the clinical postmortem state. The NDE experiencent as a creative agent may not be a passive spectator of psychic events but also an active agent whose response to his or her circumstance depends on the degree to which paranormal creative activity was a feature of his or her embodied life.

The NDE research literature is rich with paranormal descriptions, telepathic communication, OBE, clairvoyance, and precognition in ways that seem almost normative for a disembodied psychonoetic entity. A distinction I would draw between OBE and NDE is that there seems to be more evidence of paranormal perceptions in NDE, possibly enhanced by dying, even though in very advanced cases of OBE there is often evidence of powerful psi, intentionally directed. 57 Another feature is plausible veridical perceptions by the NDE experiencent; for example, accurate reports of operating room events after clinical death, or simultaneously accurate descriptions of events beyond the operating room, verified by others. 58 For Tart the link between the physical and the transpersonal, as illustrated in NDE, is the dramatic activation of psi abilities based on his dual interactive notion of the mind–brain relationship, that "mind reads the physical state of the brain (autclairvoyance) and then uses psychokinesis to affect operations in the
brain (auto-PK).” In other words, psi functions may be intrinsic to the normative interactions of mind and brain, and in near death those latent, active abilities may (theoretically) become more evident as the base of such perceptions is not the physical brain but the psychonoetic entity. Freed of physical limitations, the natural psi activity is made conscious in the discarnate state. Even so, is such knowledge “mystical”? Is all paranormal perception “mystical”? If not, what are the conditions that support the claim for psi phenomena as mystical—or is the term “mystical” simply a catchall for “nonordinary, remarkable, and strange”? My own view is that psychic phenomena are enhanced human perceptions, intrinsic to our deep subliminal capacities, and are more or less active depending on individual attention to transliminal functioning. In death, this activation may be a consequence of “subtle body” perceptions. The mystical aspect of deeper NDE reveals the larger interactive psychic world(s) beyond the normative veil of the physical.

Another issue of concern is that of the debate between proponents of “survival” as compared to those who support a theory of “super-psi” (SPSI), where survivalists argue for an actual entity in NDE that manifests psi ability and SPSI supports a belief in a single interactive field of consciousness in which psi information and events are activated by the (subconscious) minds of living individuals (that is, no surviving entity is evident). From the SPSI point of view, Tart’s theory of “simulation” would express the theory that what appears as an entity, or is remembered as such, is really a creative confluence of (subconscious) minds acting through powerful, evocative emotions in response to near death to create an entity-like illusion. My own view in the ECP model is that both of these positions have merit and contribute to deepening the complexity of the NDE event. The “expansion” of mind and awareness in NDE may reflect an enhancement of intersubjective psi influences normally operative in day-to-day life “below the threshold.” A psychonoetic entity may be participant in a shared field of intuitive psychic relationships with living, embodied individuals. The relationship of these two perspectives as contributing to the understanding of mysticism is that visionary, paranormal perceptions may have a basis in the transformation or enhancement of a surviving entity whose psychic capacities are dependent upon, or are at least deeply interconnected with, living and postmortem others in a larger shared field of intersubjective consciousness. Mystical paradigms may need to incorporate aspects of SPSI theory into their models of higher consciousness states.
In discussing each of the thresholds, I have noted them as “variable” by which I mean there are no phenomenological constants that represent a given threshold. As each domain of perception is interactive with other domains and if no one domain is valued as superior, then there is a “transparency” between domains that leads from one condition of perception to another. Thresholds are permeable and shift in accord with the capacities and developed abilities of the individual. And here I come to a crucial theoretical point. The construction of mystical perceptions, when liberated from religious dogmatism and traditionalist thinking, in an empirical sense, may not conform to any explicit hierarchy of religious values. Human beings have a remarkable ability to attain profound states or stages of consciousness, but those realizations are not necessarily consistent with more traditionalized religious thinking. In this sense, the emphasis on “transcendent” aspects of mysticism, as noted among actual mystics, may be a unique kind of bias. This is not a bias based in “false consciousness,” but a legitimate celebration of a very profound mystical event, the utter immersion of mind and heart in the primordial Unity of Being. However, the value of this “transcendent” experience, the impact and the realization of its living impression, is not necessarily the “ultimate” that many religious traditions would claim. I do not wish to devalue the impact of such experience, nor deny its reality, and as a person who has had experiences of very deep mystical consciousness, I fully affirm the value and worth of such experience. But in the scale of all human experiences, there is, as far as I know, no way to determine the worth and import of such knowledge in the face of actual embodied human existence. The counterfactual perspective is that embodied consciousness is the dominant condition, and if one avoids a skeptical or pessimistic view of human life, then embodied life is crucial for the actualization of deep consciousness potential. Does such actualization require mystical ultimates? Alternate mystical views are expressions of possible attainments mediated by significant differences and, as such, do not necessarily represent some teleological necessity or goal.

The transition across the superconscious threshold (C), beyond paranormal perceptions, as evident in “deep” NDE events, requires an interpretive frame that fully honors the experi ent and the “higher self” aspect that expresses mystical unity through utter immersive participation. The “ineffable” quality of experience often manifests in the transformative event at the third threshold, which I see as the liminal, variable boundary for a “transcendent” mystical perception. In an NDE experience, the designation of “mystical” may apply to
various stages or types of event-perceptions, through careful delineation, whereas the term “transcendent” may best apply to the deepest and highest stages of the NDE event. The term “transphysical” is a much more apt and clear designation for the dramatic, emotive event of the early stage of the NDE, the crossing of variable threshold B, into a more expansive psychically constituted and interactive domain of perception and agency. In crossing over into deeper, more ontological perceptions of threshold C, the experient often reports the complete cessation of time and the collapse of even multidimensional “space” for immersion in a profound moment of truly trans-temporal, transspatial perception, often identified as Higher Light, or as a condition incapable of being communicated in words. Such a mystical perception references the “higher self”; that is, a self that is transparent to and inseparably merged with the primordial ground of Being, even while retaining some sense of individual identity (or in more extreme states, no sense of personal identity). Metaphorically, such experience is referenced, ironically, as “empty” (meaning devoid of qualities or differentiations or self) or “full” (meaning replete with attributes in a cosmic, pervasive sense, for example, as “divine love,” utterly overflowing through self). I call this kind of mysticism trans-sensory because the experient reports unity, immersion, and oneness in such a way that “transcends” all supersensory or paranormal perceptions. In a sense, unitary consciousness is the comprehensive field, and superpsi is only a human variant of actualized, intersubjective capacities sustained within an even greater ontological wholeness and depth. For those who may doubt the ultimacy of such profound mystical perceptions in the case of NDE, I strongly suggest reading the deep NDE accounts recorded by researchers, particularly those of Kenneth Ring (1998) and P. M. Atwater (2007).61

Conclusion

The theoretical frame I find most helpful in evaluating mystical aspects of paranormal perception is the “participatory” approach to transpersonal events. Jorge Ferrer offers a positive assessment of such encounters without any reductive evaluation of their worth or significance.62 Very briefly, the participatory paradigm positively values the affective qualia that represent the transpersonal event (in this case a deep NDE) and also affirms a variable transcendental depth within the context of a vast transpersonal horizon. The “participatory event” is denoted
as an encounter, a disclosure of being, a revelation of sacred depths, resulting in a multidimensional, embodied knowing. There is no hierarchical valuing of experience per se, but more a pragmatic concern to delineate, analyze, and compare participatory events as expressive of deep and by no means easily understood aspects of Beingness. In general, a transpersonal event is irreducible to any particular stage or modality or state insofar as every level of development in the embodiment of the transpersonal horizon requires many diverse patterns of human actualization. This actualization is not simply an upward journey to light, but an exploration of possibilities in a universe of infinite scope and constant transformation—guided through authentic living and sincere embodiment of relative and viable truths.

In the context of NDE, the mystical aspects are viable expressions of a transpersonal disclosure revealing an open horizon of possible modes, or stages, of human enaction, including modes that may manifest in near-death circumstances. The existential vitality of the near-death circumstance, its drama and emotional power in almost dying, provides a unique context for exploration of the transpersonal horizon. Reports from NDE experiencers range from early stages in crossing the transphysical boundary, entering into ECP, and in further stages engaging and enacting with other transphysical entities—relations that are revelatory and meaningful; further, in very deep NDE, there are superconscious stages that correspond with mystical and transcendent interpretations within a variety of religious traditions. The impact of the experience is powerful and transformative, in ways very similar to recorded mystical accounts, and provides another index in participatory encounter of the value, worth, and significance of the event, particularly for the experiencer. In relationship to mystical theories, NDE accounts provide empirical evidence for both contextual (cultural) influences and for perspectives of a “pure consciousness” aspect in the deeper stages. The role of the imaginal also seems active (relations chosen, actions initiated, beings encountered, and so on) and more research on the role of creativity in NDE might enhance appreciation for the degree or type of agency actualized in a post- or near-mortem state. NDE narratives provide an incredibly rich, diverse, and challenging set of feature and contents that reveal a certain disparity between actual experiencers and hypothesized religious accounts of afterlife and mystical goals or ideals. I suspect that future research will increasingly challenge conventional views and may well shift the study of mysticism to more empirical accounts and a more grounded approach to enhanced human perceptions.
Notes


24. Ibid., 285.
25. Ibid., 286–287.
33. Forman (*Mysticism*, 4–5) uses autonomic/somatic terms in distinguishing visions from mystical gnosis, borrowing from the research of Ernst Gellhorn; see also Kelly and Kelly, *Irreducible Mind*, 534–537.
42. Kelly and Kelly, *Irreducible Mind*, 525–531 for an overview of “supernormal” perceptions as an implicit stage in many mystical traditions.
43. Hollenback, *Mysticism*, 280–290; I understand “imaginal” as heightened visionary ability, directed by conscious attention and training, as distinct from “imagination” as subconscious, spontaneous activities of the everyday (dreaming) mind.
47. Ibid., 78.
55. For more on this topic see, Irwin, *Visionary Worlds*, 1996.
58. The well-known example of veridical NDE is the Pam Reynolds case, see Michael Sabom, *Light and Death* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 37–52.


63. The participatory theory is developed in the following volume: Jorge Ferrer and Jacob Sherman, eds., *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), 1–78.

The Experience of Death as Non-Death

Jordan Paper

Introduction

On responding to a query as to whether he had ecstatic experiences through anesthetics (ether, etc.), the celebrated poet Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–1892) responded:

I have never had any revelations through anesthetics, but a kind of waking trance—this for lack of a better word—I have frequently had, quite up from boyhood, when I have been all alone. This has come upon me through repeating my own name to myself silently, till all at once, as it were out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state but the clearest, the surest of the surest, utterly beyond words—where death was an almost laughable impossibility—the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction, but the only true life. I am ashamed of my feeble description. Have I not said the state is utterly beyond words?1

The above statement is not meant to be metaphorical, although Tennyson may have conflated memories of this particular experience with his own exposure to meditation techniques. However, these experiences are far from rare. In the late 1960s, Sir Alister Hardy, a renowned zoologist, repeatedly made calls for individuals to send in reports of their religious experiences for research purposes. Within a two-year period, 1969–1971, 3,000 thousand reports were gathered. Eventually this would grow to over 6,000 reports held in the archives.
of the Religious Experience Research Centre, which is housed at the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David. In these reports we will find instances of Tennyson’s understanding of death.

An American woman, writing of an experience sixteen years in the past, includes the following,

Inward light (not the physical spectrum from our physics) was like normal consciousness expanded to the Y \[^{nth}\]\ degree. Personal ego vanished. Sin was not manifest. Quietness, peace, understanding, comprehension—all were as magma of light. Isolation (separate ego manifestations) were not. Physical death was not and held nothing real. Now, once back to normal consciousness I was at first deeply shook & frightened.²

An English woman in her late seventies writes of an experience that took place sixty years in the past:

A certain event had hurt and humiliated me. I rushed to my room in a state of despair feeling as worthless as an empty shell. From this point of utter emptiness it seemed as though I were caught up into another dimension. My separate self ceased to exist and for a fraction of time I seemed part of a timeless immensity of power and joy and light, something beyond this domain of life & death. My subjective and painful feelings vanished. The intensity of the vision faded, but it has remained as a vivid memory ever since.³

The purpose of this essay is an exploration of the meaning of the highlighted statements in the context of a particular experience, essential aspects of which are to be found in these excerpts. This essay focuses on the hermeneutics of this experience of self-loss in which death loses reality or significance.

**Description of the “Non-Experience Experience” of Self-Loss**

It is far from unusual for students of mysticism to note that death loses meaning and importance for mystics. For example, R. C. Zaehner wrote “for the mystic is in fact the man who has a foretaste in this life of life after death.”⁴ The experience described above, however, is more than a foretaste; it is an actual experience of death, of ceasing to exist. It is an experience that creates an understanding that death, as well as life, has no meaning. Both life and death are unreal. For reality, the
“Real” (Al-haqq, synonymous with Allah, God) in Islam is essentially nothingness or emptiness. If one understands that one does not actually exist, that nothing really exists, then death has no meaning.

This occurrence in a person’s life has been called by an anthropologist the “zero-experience,” and by some psychologists the “void-experience” and the “null-experience.” Since this experience is the one that those termed “mystics” seem to seek, I call the event, purely for convenience, the “mystic experience.” I am using the term mystic experience to denote a particular type of mystical experience rather than all ecstatic experiences in general. But what is this experience?

There are many types of ecstatic experiences. They can first be divided into functional and nonfunctional. Functional ecstasies include shamanistic, mediumistic (positive spirit possession), and related trances. These are the means by which particular types of social functionaries serve their communities. I have talked to shamans and mediums who have had the mystic experience, and for them, it is neither shamanistic nor mediumistic, as it is of no use in helping people or communities. The mystic experience was for them a private rather than a public trance. Moreover, since the mystic experience is spontaneous, as will be discussed below, it cannot be engendered when needed as shamanistic and mediumistic trances, which can be intentionally entered.

Nonfunctional ecstasies can only become culturally significant in agricultural and post-agricultural situations where the economy is sufficient to support a nonproducing class. In other words, it requires a hierarchical social system. It is only a nonproducing class that has the time and inclination to culturally value, as well as personally value, nonfunctional ecstatic experiences. Furthermore, it is the need for administration and record-keeping that leads to the development of written languages, which allows for the recording of ecstatic experiences so they can be communicated to others in the same socioeconomic situation.

One can distinguish many types of nonfunctional ecstasies, such as for instance unitive experiences in which the individual joins with or becomes one with the ultimate. In these experiences, one does not disappear, for one is aware of the union as it takes place. In the mystic experience, the crucial aspect is not union, which is an invariable part of the experience, but the disappearance or loss of self. For a brief time, one simply does not exist.5

There is a cross-cultural similarity of descriptions—not interpretations of the experience which are cultural—of the mystic experience. A study of the files in the aforementioned Religious Experience Research Centre, of reports from my students over decades of teaching, of
self-reports from some Western scholars, of the writings of mystics in virtually all literate cultures, and of my own experience allows a summary description. Before proceeding, however, there are two commonalities affecting the summary that must be commented upon.

The first is that all received descriptions or mentions of the mystic experience are necessarily ineffable. An experience that is not actually experienced cannot be described because there is neither memory nor awareness of it. It is only known through surmising what takes place between the moment when one loses consciousness and the moment when one begins to regain it. As Tennyson stated, “the state is utterly beyond words.” St. Symeon (949–1022) of the Eastern Orthodox tradition fleshes this out:

I find no words. My mind sees what is being accomplished but cannot explain it. It contemplates; it wants to speak yet finds no word. What it sees is invisible, entirely devoid of form, simple, wholly incomposite, infinite in greatness.6

My favorite statement in this regard is the last two lines of a poem by the fourth–fifth century Chinese poet Tao Qian: “In these things there is a fundamental truth / I would like to tell but lack the words.”7

The second commonality is the matter of spontaneity. A number of meditation traditions posit the mystic experience as the highest experience, proposing that one can reach it if one follows a particular regimen for a number of years. But many who do follow such traditions do not have the mystic experience, while many who follow no such regimens do have the mystic experience. Some mystics have pointed out that the experience is unpredictable and spontaneous; following a regimen might advance the possibility or might not. Agehananda Bharati, the anthropologist of Indian mysticism and mystic himself, writes:

The zero-experience comes to those to whom it comes regardless of what they do…There is really no predictable link between anything they [orthodox practitioners of yoga] or anyone else does and the occurrence or recurrence of the zero-experience.8

Similarly, in the earliest Chinese text concerning the mystic experience, the Zhuangzi, we find the following response to the question as to whether attaining the mystic experience requires “much cultivating of the mind”:

Water flows, not because it does anything, but because it is a natural talent. The power (de) of the Perfect Person (one who has had the
experience) [is the same]; he/she does not cultivate it, and yet she/he is unable to separate him/herself from all things. As the sky is naturally high, earth is naturally substantial, and the sun and moon are naturally bright, how can it (de) be cultivated?9

The two reports at the Religious Experience Research Centre quoted here, as well as others from those files, and reports from my students makes clear that the mystic experience can take place among those who not only did not seek it, but were utterly surprised by it. Thus, the experience can best be understood as spontaneous, not the result of any particular technique.

The experience can not only be surprising but frightening to a person who is not prepared for it, especially in the contemporary world, when one who has had the experience could be diagnosed as seriously mentally ill. For those already oriented toward mysticism, as the professional mystics quoted in this essay, awareness of the experiences of other mystics through their writings, or of familiarity with conceptual systems that encompass the experience, as found, for example, in the Upanishads, leads one to the recognition of what is happening and a willingness to embrace the experience.

Usually, when the experience begins the person is still, although I have one report from a dancer who had the experience during a performance of a ballet that had been extensively rehearsed.10 A Sufi master in Konya let me know that the experience can take place during the whirling Sufi ritual dance, although it would still be uncommon. Hence, the experience can take place while acting in a highly routinized manner, such as praying. Constant repetition of a prayer, such as the “Jesus Prayer” in the Eastern Orthodox tradition,11 could have the same effect. Triggers could be intense aesthetic appreciation of a natural or artistic phenomenon, psychological trauma, an erotic experience or feeling; indeed, they can be of many sorts.

The mystic experience begins by perceiving one’s surroundings flowing into one, faster and faster, until everything in the cosmos becomes part of you or you become all of it: Niffari (d. 965) wrote: “I saw the sun, moon, stars and all the lights /.../ Everything came towards me— / Nothing remained that did not—.”12 As one merges with the cosmos, one feels oneself rising, then rushing, toward a light, a light that is brighter than any perceived before, or the light may be perceived of as enveloping one. The light is invariably described as white, but with the understanding that it contains all of the colors. Meister Eckhardt (1260–ca.1328) writes: “Comes then the soul into
the unmixed light of God. It is transported so far from creaturehood into nothingness...losing its own identity in the process.”

It is at this point that one somehow realizes that if one merges with the light, one will simply cease to exist, or lose oneself into the all that is nothingness, nonexistence. One understands that one can either embrace dissolution or turn back and end the ecstasy:

I stopped trying to think and the light hesitated, came towards me, stopped, wavered, came on, completely obliterating the darkness, then it exploded into me. Not around me or over me, but into me. For the barest fraction of a moment I was overwhelmed by the sheer ecstasy of it, smothered. I couldn’t stand it and purposely broke the spell...I came out of it almost as soon as I went into it because I couldn’t stand what it was—not that it was painful (not as we think of pain) but because Joy?! If one allows oneself to continue, one disappears into pure, unadulterated bliss, one literally loses one’s self. In the Zhuangzi we find the following statement:

Nanguo Zichi sat leaning on his armrest, looking up at the sky and breathing serenely, as though his self had lost its opposite. [His disciple on asking what was happening received the reply:] “Just now, I had lost myself (wu sang wo).”

As one merges with the cosmos, the sense of joy becomes far greater than anything one has hitherto experienced; it is a feeling of utter bliss. As stated in the Upanishads, “This is it—thus they recognize the highest, indescribable happiness.” And then one is gone. The extremely condensed Heart Sutra, after positing that even the tiniest constituents of existence are in actuality empty, ends: “Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond, O what an awakening, all-hail!”

After an unknown passage of time, one slowly comes back into consciousness, the world reveals itself to one’s eyes, sounds are heard by the ears, one can feel one’s body. How much time has passed is unknown. Was it seconds? Was it minutes? Was it hours? What one does know, regardless of culture, is that one has experienced the only actuality that is real, all else is falsehood, illusion. And that reality is simply nothingness or emptiness, in which there is neither life nor death, for in reality one does not exist. Hence, in monotheistic cultures, God is said by some mystics to be “nothingness.” A disciple of the Great Maggid, Levi Isaac of Berdichev, writes in Kedushat ha-Levi:
When the Zaddik cleaves to the nought, and is [then] annihilated, then alone he worships the Creator from the aspect of all the Zaddikim, since no division of the attributes is discernable there at all... There is a Zaddik who cleaves to the nought and nevertheless returns afterward to his essence.18

Meister Eckhardt was charged with heresy for saying that God was a “nothingness”; he probably would have been convicted had he not died before the trial. The Eastern Orthodox tradition is more welcoming of the mystic experience. St. Symeon writes:

Attend to the mystery of God ineffable: mysteries unutterable, strange, and altogether unheard of. God truly is, He really is... but he is nothing, absolutely nothing of all the realities we know, nor of the things which angels know. And in this sense I say: God is nothing, nothing [at] all.19

Death as Non-Death

To exist means to be alive. The opposite of being alive is death. Hence, the experience of ceasing to exist, of losing one’s self into nothingness in the mystic experience, is to experience death, even if it is a fleeting moment.

How this experience will be understood and accordingly expressed is ancillary to the mystic experience because it is a matter of culture. The concept of life and death varies from culture to culture and a proper discussion of these differences would be an essay in itself. It is sufficient for understanding the following quotations to but briefly mention these concepts for the cultures to which reference is made. In much of South Asia by the time of the Upanishads and early Buddhism life was understood as cyclical—life followed death over and over again—and this had a negative connotation. The term “samsāra” means the cycle of life and death, as well as suffering. The goal of the mystics was to leave the cycle, samsāra: “moksha” (liberation) in the Upanishads and “Nirvāṇa” (extinction) in the Buddhist texts. In early China, on death it was understood that one of the two souls went up into Sky to join with the other ancestors and one soul went down into Earth to live a shadow life. In the eastern Mediterranean world, Hellenistic cults focused on resurrection after death, and Christianity has made that the essence of its teachings. In Judaism and Islam there are varying understandings of life after death, only some of which involve resurrection, whether physical or spiritual.
There are two universal features of the temporary death in the mystic experience: bliss and nothingness or emptiness. Concerning bliss, 'Abd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin al-Qushayrā (d. 1074) wrote, “As for ecstatic existentiality (wujūd), it occurs after one rises beyond wajd. There is no existential ecstatic experience (wujūd) of the real except after the extinction of the mortal.” Abū l-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 910) wrote, “They find bliss hidden in it, through enjoyment of existence in the mode of non-existence.”

Experiencing the loss of self, of nothingness, can be expressed as forgetting, emptiness, annihilation or death, the theme of this essay. The concept of forgetting can be found in a number of traditions. Eckhardt writes, “Further, I say that if the soul is to know God, it must forget itself and lose itself, for as long as it is self-aware and self-conscious, it will not see or be conscious of God.” From a nontheistic perspective, in the Zhuangzi we find:

I allow my limbs and body to fall away, expel my intellectual faculties, leave my substance, get rid of knowledge, and become identical with the Great Universality: this is sitting in forgetfulness (zuowang).

In the Zhuangzi, “emptiness” is the most common term for describing reality known through the mystic experience, here expressed as “fasting the mind”:

Unify the will. Do not listen with the ears, listen with your mind; [rather] do not listen with your mind, listen with your essence [or spirit, qi]. Hearing stops at the ears; the mind stops at what tallies with it; essence being empty, awaits everything. Only the Dao gathers in emptiness, the fasting of the mind is [this] emptiness.

The term “annihilation” can be found, among other places, in the writings of the Great Maggid Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezherich:

And when he unites with God, who is the Alpha of the world, he becomes ‘ADaM…and man must separate himself from any corporeal things to such an extent that he will ascend through all the worlds and be in union with God, until [his] existence will be annihilated, and then he will be called ‘ADaM.

Annihilation means death, and we can find the equation of the mystic experience and death in many mystic traditions. The well-known Spanish mystic Theresa of Avila (1515–1582) writes in The Interior Castle:
There is no need here to suspend the mind since all the faculties are asleep in this state—and truly asleep—to the things of the world and to ourselves... In sum, it is like one who in every respect has died to the world so as to live more completely in God. The death is a delightful one... For during the time of this union, it neither sees, nor hears, nor understands, because the union is always short and seems to the soul even much shorter than it probably is.

In the South Asian traditions, we find not so much “death” as a descriptive term for the mystic experience but expressions that the experience is beyond death. The Hindu philosopher Shankara (ca. 788–820) wrote, “There is neither birth nor death, neither bound nor aspiring soul nor seeker after liberation—this is the ultimate and absolute truth.”

In the Buddhist text, *Saddharmapundarika*, we find:

And someone who discerns dharmas as in their own-being like an illusion or a dream,
Without a core, like a plantain tree, or similar to an echo,
And who knows that the triple world, without exception, has such an own-being,
And is neither bound nor free, he does not discern Nirvana (as separate from the triple world).
He knows that all dharmas [the infinitely small, infinitely short in duration constituents of all that exists] are the same, empty, essentially without multiplicity.

... All dharmas are the same, all the same, always quite the same.
When one has recognized this, one understands Nirvāṇa, the deathless and blest.

Losing oneself and going beyond death leads to immortality in the sense of losing identity in merging with the ultimate. The *Katha Upanishad* provides an early expression of this understanding:

When cease the five
[Sense-] knowledge, together with the mind,
And the intellect stirs not—
That, they say, is the highest course.

... Then a mortal becomes immortal!
Therein he reaches Brahma!

Far more writings on the mystic experience focus on ecstatic union and, in different ways, the loss of self, than death per se. But the complete
extinction of the self is death, for death means that one no longer exists, and in the case of the mystic experience, this nonexistence is not of the physical body, although awareness of it disappears, but of the self in all its permutations—soul, spirit, etc. Perhaps the only meaningful difference between this death and physical death is that the loss of self is temporary for one does return to life. This temporary experience of not existing does lead all those I have spoken to who have had the experience to lose all fear or concern with death. After the experience, one knows what death, or at least the moment before death, feels like: it is pure bliss.

Some become addicted to this bliss and wish to lose oneself in it over and over again. This desire is bound to be frustrated, because the more one seeks the experience, the less likely one is to have it. Others, including myself, are satisfied with having the experience once—not that I would mind having it again, of course. The effects are permanent. Although my own experience took place over four decades ago, I remember it more clearly than any other memory. But I know that to enhance the possibility of repeating the experience, I would have to simplify my life, to give up my involvements with family, society, teaching, and research—none of which was taking place at the particular time I had the experience. That is what Gautama Buddha did. He left his wife and parents, his responsibilities, and his occupation. But after having the experience, he changed from living a solitary life to assist others who had also left ordinary life in their endeavors, rather than trying to repeat the experience. Thus the death of self-loss, for many, leads one to embrace life and service to others even more fully. This death is a non-death because it leads not just back to life, but it may lead to an enhanced life.

This is not meant to imply that the mystic experience necessitates one becoming a better person in the social sense. It does not change the personality; it can enhance it, if one is already oriented toward self-improvement. On the other hand, using polite language, a person who behaves in socially undesirable ways may continue to do so or perhaps act even more selfishly or viciously. Because the experience is a non-experience, it does not change a person, it adds no new knowledge, but it does change the attitude toward death. One cannot be apprehensive of a future experience of death when one has already had a positive temporary death experience, which includes indescribable joy.

Conclusion: A Personal Understanding

Before I had the mystic experience in 1972, I intellectually understood the meaninglessness of death from my readings of the *Upanishads* and
from experiences surrounding Zen meditation. After studying *iaido*, along with *kendo*, in Kyoto, I emotionally understood it. For in *iaido*, different from *kendo* (Japanese fencing with a bamboo approximation of a two-handed battle sword while wearing armor), one uses a real sword and can have no living opponent—otherwise, someone will die after each bout. Hence, one’s opponent psychologically and spiritually is one’s self. Imaginatively killing oneself in practice over and over again leads to death losing all emotional content.

After having had the mystic experience (in Toronto not Kyoto), I immediately utterly comprehended that death is simply blissfully becoming what one actually is: simply nothing. Death has no meaning if one does not really exist. To put it another way, if all that exists is empty, and the only reality is nothingness, which in the theistic traditions is God, then both God and oneself are one and the same in absolute emptiness.

Does this then make life meaningless? Yes, in the rational sense; no, in the experiential sense. Since we are experiencing life, we might as well enjoy it, to live life to the fullest. But not to live it selfishly, because as we humans are social beings, our greatest pleasure, aside from losing oneself in bliss, comes from assisting others to enjoy life with us. And when physical death comes, we can but joyfully welcome leaving illusion for the blissful Real. As Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250) succinctly put it, *samsāra* is *nirvāna*; *nirvāna* is *samsāra*.

**Notes**

2. Religious Experience Research Centre, entry number 1066. Emphasis added.
7. Tao Qian, Number 5 of “Twenty Poems after Drinking Wine” (own translation).
9. *Zhuangzi*, chapter 2 (all translations from the *Zhuangzi* are my own).
15. Zhuangzi, chapter 2.
21. Ibid., 261.
23. Zhuangzi, chapter 2.
30. For more on this topic, see Bharati, *The Light at the Center*, 90–91.
Introduction

Visions at the end of life can serve many functions in Hinduism. They can act as a guide or map, telling the soul where it should travel next, or give a peaceful death, or reveal a deity. In the various types of Hinduism, there are different ideas about where the soul goes after death. In the early Vedic period, the soul would follow the path of the gods (devayana) to a heavenly world, from which it would not be reborn, or it may follow the path to the world of the ancestors (pitrivyana). The soul is carried by Agni, escorted by Savitur, and protected by Pusan on its travels. As the Rig Veda notes, the soul may ideally go to the highest heaven.¹ Its goal is immortality, thus avoiding rebirth and a second encounter with death.

In the Upanishads and later Advaita Vedanta, the soul is described as going from one body to another like a caterpillar going from one leaf to another.² It is purified from life to life, and it gains progressively better forms during this process, as gold is purified. We have images of the soul as a spark from a giant fire, and a drop of water in the ocean of consciousness. The best death would be as a liberated person or jivanmukta. Such a person has realized his or her deeper self or atman, and merged with brahman, the ocean of consciousness. The process of gaining liberation or moksha would be accompanied by visions of light, during life or at the moment of death.
In Hindu folk tales, after death the soul could become a wandering ghost (*preta*), floating about the earth or the underworld. In some stories, the god Yama or his messengers come to pull out the soul at death with a noose. Yama is accompanied by his two dogs and rides on his water buffalo. The soul is then dragged to the royal court of Yama, who appears in his role as Dharmaraj, lord of *dharma* or cosmic order. At court, the soul is to be judged on its actions. Yama takes the soul to the appropriate section of Naraka, the hell worlds, or he can guide the soul up to Swarga or heaven if it is suitable.

One’s next life is dependent upon one’s karma, the result of one’s deeds. The role of karma in death and rebirth is later elaborated in the classical *dharmasastra* or law texts. These books develop theories of the different subtypes of karma that influence the direction and situation of rebirth. However, these are not visionary texts—they are primarily theoretical, and they discuss the influences on rebirth and rewards and punishments for deeds.

According to the folk tradition of *paraloka vidya*, the bonds that link the soul and body are dissolved at the moment of death. Mantras should be chanted at the cremation ground to encourage the vital energies (*pranas*) to leave the body, and the five bodily elements to return to their origins. The soul hovers around familiar places in disembodied form for up to ten days. When the *pranas* are withdrawn from the body into the soul (*jiva*), the person perceives the desires and memories (*vasanas*) that are normally unconscious. These are traditionally personified as Chitragupta (“secret pictures”), the messenger of Yama, lord of death. On the eleventh day, the soul begins its journey to Yama’s world. It can be strengthened by rituals performed for the soul by relatives on earth. It takes up to a year for the soul to reach Yama’s kingdom.

With the rise of *bhakti* or devotional religion, there were new possibilities for the soul. Love of a god or goddess could change what happened at the moment of death. Chanting the name of the god, or visualization of divine images or symbols (such as *yantras*), could bring the deity down to the dying soul. Among Vaishnavas, the name of Rama or Narayana acted as a *taraka mantra*, which helps in crossing the ocean of *samsara*, and frees the soul from rebirth. While the concept of the *taraka mantra* dates from the *Jabala Upanishad* (1.1), it gradually became an important Vaishnava ritual to chant the name of the god, especially at the moment of death.

In devotional Hinduism, the dualistic or *saguna* understanding of divinity became popular. The soul was no longer a just spark or a
droplet returning to the whole. Instead, it was an individual rising to enter a heaven, guided by a deity who could come to the person at the moment of death. For Vaishnavas, those who worship the god Vishnu, the deity might come to take the person to his eternal heaven of Vaikuntha or Vrindavana, or send his messengers to rescue the soul from danger at death. There are many stories of the god Vishnu fighting Yama, lord of death, for the souls of his devotees. As a well-known example, we have the story of Ajamila, described in the sixth book of the Bhagavata Purana, a major sacred text of Bengali Vaishnavism.

In this story, the king Parikshit and his guru Sukadev discuss the life of a Brahmin named Ajamila. He had lived a pious life until he chanced upon a couple having passionate sex. The image filled his mind, and he could no longer concentrate on prayer and meditation. He left his wife and went to live with a prostitute, and he had many children with her, living by robbery and fraud.

On his deathbed he called to his favorite son, Narayana (Narayana is also a name of the god Vishnu). As he died, the messengers of Yama, lord of death (the Yamadutas) arrived with their nooses to drag his soul away to the underworld. But when the servants of Vishnu, the Vishnudutas, heard him call on Narayana at the moment of death, they also came to the dying man. The young and beautiful servants of Vishnu demanded Ajamila’s soul from the fearful and twisted servants of Yama, and this begins a long discussion in the text about good and evil behavior, and the nature of the soul.4

Yama’s dark messengers argued that the man had lived a sinful life, and deserved to be punished. But Vishnu’s golden messengers argued that chanting the name of God at the moment of death atoned for the sins of millions of births. By calling the name of God on his deathbed, Ajamila left behind all of his sins. Calling the name burns sins to ashes, as fire burns dry grass; it is like medicine, which works even if it is used by an ignorant person.5 Yama’s messengers were intimidated by this argument, and left. Vishnu’s messengers had mercy on Ajamila, and allowed him to return to life.

This vision that Ajamila saw on his deathbed changed his life. He realized the extent of his bad behavior, and vowed never again to act in that way. He became a yogi, devoting himself to meditation. When he died later on, he had another vision of the golden messengers of Vishnu, and he consciously chose to die. He went with them to the heaven of Vishnu, where he was welcomed.6

While the story of Ajamila is usually understood as an argument for the power of chanting the name of God (thus generally the power
of mantra), it is also a story of an ecstatic experience at death. It is Ajamila’s deathbed vision that turns him from a worldly person into a renunciant performing meditation, a yogi. It also shows the tension between the Vedic and bhakti conceptions of death.

Vaishnavism is a major school of devotion in West Bengal. The other major school worships the god Shiva and the goddess Shakti or Kali. For Shaivites, those who worship Shiva, the god could appear at death both to yogis and bhaktas, and he could take his devotees to his heaven of Kailash. Shaktas worship the goddess Kali as mother of life, death, and rebirth. Kali is said to appear at death to keep the soul from harm during the process of reincarnation, and she takes souls to her heaven of Manidvipa to rest in her lap forever, as well as bringing liberation to the deserving.

In this essay, we shall focus on the goddess worship tradition of West Bengal, called Bengali Shaktism. It has many stories of Kali as the goddess of rebirth, who saves her devotees at the end of life. It also has a range of rituals for those who meditate upon the dead—very literally. By sitting and meditating upon a newly dead corpse, the Shakta practitioner can evoke the vision of the goddess.

This ritual brings an indirect and perhaps vicarious form of visionary experience. When the person sits upon a corpse and meditates, the vision of the goddess who normally comes at death also appears to the meditator during life. We might call it a “near death experience,” a vision of the goddess who appears to the living person who is in physical proximity to the dead one.

Sitting on the Corpse’s Chest: The Ritual of Sava-sadhana

While other regional forms of tantra in India are famed for their real or imagined sexual rituals, the Bengali style of Shakta tantra is perhaps most marked by its emphasis on death. Sava-sadhana, or the ritual practice of sitting on a corpse, is one of its most important rituals. For many practitioners interviewed during field research, it is the single most important ritual in Shaktism or goddess worship.

The corpse ritual combines three types of Bengali Shaktism: folk, tantric, and bhakti. From the folk perspective, the power of the corpse ritual enhances life on earth. Challenging death leads to immortality, which is defined as amrta, non-death, a situation implying long life, wealth, and power. From the yogic or tantric perspective, rituals in
the burning ground lead to detachment from the physical world and union with a transcendent ground, as Shakti or brahman. The Shakta tantrika is said to have conquered the power of death, wrestling with all possible fears while with the corpse. From the devotional or bhakti perspective, the ritual brings a loving relationship with a goddess of life and death who has a form and personality, and gives salvation by her grace. All of these are present in the sava-sadhana rite.

The typical sava-sadhana practice is performed on a new moon night (or the eighth or fourteenth day of the moon). The practitioner should go to a burning ground or some other lonely spot (a deserted house, a river side, under a bilva tree, or on a hill). He (or she) should bring a corpse, young and attractive, of a man who died recently. The body is washed, and placed on a blanket, deer or tiger skin. The practitioner should worship it, and then sit on the corpse and contemplate the goddess. He or she will experience fearful images and sounds, as well as temptations, but he must remain emotionally detached—or else he may go insane. He must conquer all of his fears. If he is successful, he may gain the power to use a mantra (mantrasiddhi), or other supernatural powers, or have a vision of the goddess. Kali may appear to possess the corpse, or appear before the practitioner as a beautiful woman, a little girl, or a great goddess in the sky. When various types of mantras are chanted, the practitioner can gain supernatural insight from the different forms of Kali.

The origin of the corpse ritual is unknown. Shaivite Kapalikas and Kalamukhas early on made use of skulls and bones, and folk religion throughout India has used ritual sacrifices, including at times human sacrifices, to propitiate the gods and to make the ground fertile. The corpses used in this ritual should already be dead, though there have been dark broodings by scholars about whether this is always the case. The Bengali historian of religion Narendranath Bhattacharya speculates that this practice involves murder, for how else will the tantrika get a corpse at the right time? He suggests that the tantrika gets a young low-caste boy drunk and kills him, and uses him as the corpse in the ritual. Bhattacharya calls the practice “a typical and clumsy overgrowth of the primitive beliefs and rituals connected with fertility, death and revival.”

However, I should note that tantrikas with whom I have spoken say that the goddess must choose the corpse herself—indeed, finding the right corpse is proof that it is time to perform the ritual. To kill a person in order to create your own corpse would be to take over the goddess’ responsibilities, and this would displease her. Pleasing the
goddess is the point of the ritual, for it is up to her whether to bestow
her vision and blessings. She provides the corpse when the time is right,
and it must be male (we should note that, according to informants, the
goddess will be angry if people sit and meditate upon a female corpse,
and she will not appear).

Shakta tantrikas interviewed in Kolkata often had a relationship
with the doms or low-caste people who remove the dead from hospita-
tals, and prepare the bodies for cremation. The doms would inform
them when a suitable body appeared, and would take the bodies to
them. The tantrikas would then pay them, or barter for the bodies
with blessings and prayers.11

The use of corpses in ritual has also been associated with posses-
sion trance and asceticism. In the ancient Bengali Gambhira rites there
was a corpse dance, and the corpse was “awakened”—life was ritually
instilled, without visible signs. It was purified by mantras, and placed
in a pool or tied to high branches of a tree. A badi or low-caste scav-
enger would then decorate it with mala wreaths and vermilion, and tie
a cord around its waist. The presence of the corpse would inspire the
god Shiva to possess his devotees, and they would become strong with
Shiva’s own endurance and capable of withstanding various austerities
(needles and nails driven into the body, through the tongue, into the
sides with cloths hanging that are dipped in ghee and then lit on fire).
In some cases, there was also possession by spirits (bhutas and pre-
tas) or by the goddess Mashan Chamunda Kali, and the participants
would sing songs to avert evil.12

In Bengali Shakta tantra, the corpse ritual is part of the tantric path
known as vamacara (the path of the left or reverse practice) or kulacara
(the path of a family group or religious lineage). The goal is loosening
the person from the bonds of samsara—he or she is no longer attached,
neither hates nor fears, is ashamed of nothing, and has gone beyond all
traditional notions of good and evil. The practitioner is understood to
have passed through the lowest stage of pasubhava, the animal stage,
where the person conforms to social conventions and obeys rules with-
out question. The middle stage of virabhava is when the practitioner acts
as a hero. He or she breaks traditional rules, to go beyond ordinary laws
and gain insight into the liberation that exists beyond ordinary social
conventions. One who attains this state is considered to be in the highest
state of divyabhava, beyond purity and impurity. It is a radical breaking
of attachment, with both the world of samsara and traditional morality.

The devotional approach to the corpse ritual interprets the practice
to reflect divine love, and it is evidence of one’s passion and dedication
to the goddess. Indeed, the goddess is herself often seated on a corpse in her iconography. The god Shiva without his consort Shakti is said to be a corpse, and the goddess (often in the form of Kali) may stand over him or sit upon him. The practitioner meditates upon Shakti/Kali who is visualized in the heart lotus, sitting upon the pretas (spirits) of Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, Ishvara, and Sadashiva. They are visualized as dead, because they cannot act without her power. The goddess is naked, and surrounded by jackals. In her form as Ucchistacandalini, she wears a red sari and ornaments, carries a skull and a sword, and sits on a corpse.

The corpse ritual is performed to bring a vision of the goddess or Devi. As an early writer on tantra, Sir John Woodroffe, has noted, the practitioner (sadhaka) draws a mandala or yantra on the corpse, and chants a mantra (japa):

In successful Savasana the Devi, it is said, appears to the Sadhaka. In Sava-sadhana the Sadhaka sits astride on the back of a corpse (heading [towards] the north), on which he draws a Yantra and then does Japa... The Devata materialized by means of the corpse. There is possession of it (Avesa)—that is, entry of the Devata into the dead body. At the conclusion of a successful rite, it is said, that the head of the corpse turns round, and, facing the Sadhaka, speaks, bidding him name his boon, which may be spiritual or worldly advancement as he wishes. This is part of the Nila Sadhana done by the “Hero” (Vira), for it and Savasana are attended by many terrors.

The devotee sits upon the corpse to call down the goddess, who saves him when he is threatened by demons or ghosts. As the Tantra Tattva phrases it:

If her son is in trouble, Ma runs down from her golden throne on Mt. Kailas, without staying even to arrange her dress, and [she] extends her ten fear-dispelling arms in ten directions, crying “fear not.”

Here the tantrika is the child of the deity, overwhelmed by fear and love, who seeks to dwell in the lap of the goddess. This is the bhakti surrender of the devotee, who passes the ocean of birth and death to dwell in eternity with his goddess. The ritual of sava-sadhana is a powerful way to call down the goddess, for her power (sakti) is understood to dwell most strongly in corpses, burning grounds, jackals, and natural sites. In this ritual, the corpse itself becomes the body of the deity, and the practitioner also becomes ritually sanctified. The goddess may also be worshiped in other bodies, where the power of the mantra
(mantra-sakti) reveals her true form. She may be worshiped as Kumari in the bodies of young virgins, as Uma in jackals, as Mother of Siddhis within the brahmani bird or kite. She may enter the corpse itself, and speak through its mouth, or she may appear in a vision. The goddess descends as a saviorress in the midst of fear, as the early Bengali writer and practitioner Siva Chandra Vidyrarnava Bhattacharya states:

When all earthly means fail...when in that terrible and pitless great cremation ground, where horrors do a frantic dance, there is, despite the presence of the all-good Mother, nothing in all the infinite world which for our safety we can call our own; in that deep darkness of a new-moon night, haunted with destructive Bhairavas, Vetalas, Siddhas, Bhutas, Vatukas and Dakinis...when the firm and heroic heart of even the great Vira [hero] shakes with fear; when even the intricate bonds of the Sadhaka's posture on the back of the corpse which is awakened by Mantra is loosened; when with a fanning (sic) heart the Vira feels as he sits the earth quake furiously under him; when without means of rescue he is about to fall and be crushed; when he is overtaken by the swoon of death—if even at such times the Sadhaka but...extends his uplifted hands, saying, “Save me, I pray thee, O Gurudeva!” then the Mother of the world, who is Herself the Guru, at once forgets all his faults, dispels all his difficulties with Her glance, and stretching forth ten hands instead of two, says: “Come, my child, there is no more fear,” and blesses the Sadhaka by raising him to Her assuring bosom.

Here danger is deliberately sought, so that the Mother goddess must come down and rescue the devotee.

One of the earliest stories of the Shakta form of the corpse ritual is the story of Sarvananda of Mehar. This story was told to me by several informants in Calcutta, and seems to be an important origin story for Bengali tantrikas. Sarvananda was believed to have lived in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, and to have attained siddhi by means of this ritual on new-moon night.

The story of Sarvananda begins with his grandfather, Vasudeva Bhattacharya, of Tipperah (in what is now West Bengal). He was a devoted Shakta, who went to Kamakhya in Assam to practice tantric worship of the goddess (sakti sadhana). He heard a voice say that he would attain liberation in his next life, when he would be reborn as his own grandson. He gave to his servant Purnananda an engraved piece of copper with a mantra (or yantra), for worshipping the goddess.

Later Sarvananda, his grandson born after his death, was also attended by Purnananda, now an old man. The boy was uneducated,
and both neighbors and family jeered at his lack of intelligence. While wandering about depressed he was initiated by a passing sannyasi, who told him to perform ritual practice with Purnananda. Purnananda told him about the most powerful form of practice, the corpse ritual.

Sarvananda and Purnananda got all the ritual implements together, and only needed a recently dead corpse to serve as the seat of the tantric practitioner. Purnananda volunteered for this so that he might be blessed for his sacrifice, and Sarvananda agreed. Purnananda strangled himself, warning Sarvananda that he should be neither tempted nor afraid, and only ask for the vision of the Mother.

Sarvananda sat on the corpse of Purnananda—he saw horrible ghosts, terrible storms, beautiful heavenly dancers, and finally the vision of the Mother goddess. She revealed her many forms to him, light and dark, and she gave him supernatural powers. He remained detached throughout. The goddess blessed him and revived Purnananda, and Sarvananda became a siddha purusa, a liberated person. The dark, new-moon night was miraculously transformed into a shining full-moon night. He also gained the power of vak siddhi, so that all of his statements became true. He was the first Shakta tantrika to see the goddess in all of her ten great wisdom forms in one night (the dasa mahavidya).21

Thus the corpse ritual evoked the goddess, who blessed Sarvananda with wisdom. His practice came by inspiration, but over time the ritual became suggested and even required, with a threat of hell for its non-performance. As the Kali Tantra states of the practitioner:

12. He who worships (the goddess) Parvati without the corpse ritual will live a terrible life in Naraka (a hell-world) until the great destruction at the end of the universe.22

Another famous practitioner of the corpse ritual was the eighteenth-century Shakta poet Ramprasad Sen. He is said to have performed this ritual on a funeral pyre using a mala or rosary made of human bone. He also performed it under a bilva tree, above a seat made of the skulls of five animals, including humans (pancamunda asana).23 He too gained a vision of the goddess, and she blessed him for his devotion and dedication.

According to Shakta folklore, it is the devotion of the practitioner that brings the goddess down to him. He is so passionate that he is willing to risk the dangers of the burning ground, its ghosts and demons and jackals, to bring the goddess to him. She may enter his heart, or she may enter the corpse when it becomes a dwelling place (murti) for
the goddess. Its head is said to turn around, and begin speaking affectionately (or sometimes terrifyingly) to the devotee. When the devotee asks for a boon, the goddess cannot refuse.

To bring the goddess Shakti into the corpse is also to bring life and power (sakti) into it, as Shakti is said to enliven Shiva. Some Shakta tantrikas compare the devotee’s own body to a corpse, saying that the goddess must enter into the heart to enliven it. Others say that the practitioner himself becomes both the goddess and the corpse, realizing in him or herself both the divine spirit and the physical body.

In this practice, the corpse plays several roles. It may act as a ritual instrument, a magical battery that stores energy (sakti). This is why its topknot of hair is ritually tied—to hold the energy in during the ritual, and it is untied at the end (immersing the corpse in water serves this same function). It is also a warning—it motivates detachment from the physical world, destroys the fear of death, and brings union with the deity. The corpse may be a vessel or icon, into which the goddess descends for a temporary dwelling, or a favorite object of hers, which attracts her blessing. Proximity to the corpse brings knowledge of death and divinity through direct, ecstatic vision.

**The Possession of a Dead Body**

Why should a corpse be capable of being possessed by a god or goddess? Normally this state is reserved for living renunciants, professional trance mediums, and devotees. However, in this case, the corpse is not believed to be fully dead.

In Indian tradition, there are two understandings of the moment of death. One is the moment of physical death, when the body dies. The other is the time of cremation, and more specifically the *kapala kriya*—the ritual midway through the cremation, when the chief mourner cracks open the skull of the burnt corpse with a staff, to release the prana or vital breath. This is when the soul leaves the body. There is thus a distinction between physical death of the body and ritual death of the soul. Death impurity begins at the release of this prana, and the *sraddha* rite of commemoration is performed on the anniversary of the burning of the body, not of the person’s death. Before the time of ritual death, the corpse is in a liminal state, neither fully dead nor alive, and thus an appropriate home for a deity who may exist both on earth and his or her heaven.

*Sava-sadhana* is a Shakta religious practice, whose goal is an ecstatic encounter with the goddess. However, despite the presence
of a deity, the religious elements shown in the corpse ritual have not been emphasized by the few writers to discuss this ritual. Why is this? There are several possible reasons. The magical dimension has been sensationalized in memoirs and fiction books by writers in India, and associated with the criminal and perverse. Westerners, especially missionaries and Victorians, were repulsed by the whole tantric dimension and saw it as evil and demonic. For missionaries teaching the Bible, contact with death was limited and, in some cases, forbidden. In India, the corpse is associated by brahmanical Hinduism with impurity, the opposite of religion, and such impurity is threatening. Tantric practitioners responded with the desire to keep advanced rituals secret, and ignored the accusations or called their calumniators “spiritually primitive,” like animals (pasus). They were unwilling to expose sacred teachings to hostile observers. For these reasons, and perhaps others, both Shakta tantrikas and their brahmanical and Victorian opponents tended to suppress the religious dimensions of the ritual.

Visions of the Goddess at the End of Life

What is the meaning of the sava-sadhana ritual, and its end-time visions? We might suggest that it is a preparation for death, by sharing the dying visions of the soul and its corpse, and learning about the goddess and gaining her blessing. The burning ground is the place of cremation, and people who go there to meditate are symbolically renouncing attachment to their bodies and their lives. They can see the goddess of death and rebirth because they are symbolically announcing that they are ready for that process, even if they are still alive. Why wait for the last minute? This is where their lives will end, so it is useful to know about it in advance.

In some cases, the ritual is understood as symbolic—the interior cremation ground is the burning ground of the heart, where passions are overcome. This metaphor can be found in the poetry of the seventeenth-century Shakta devotee Ramprasad Sen:

Because you love the burning ground  
I have made a burning ground of my heart  
So that you, dark goddess, can dance there forever.  
I have no other desire left, O Mother  
A funeral pyre is blazing in my heart.  
Ashes from corpses are all around me, my Mother  
In case you decide to come.
Prasad prays, “O Mother, at the hour of death
Keep your devotee at your feet.
Please come dancing with rhythmic steps
Let me see you when my eyes are closed.”

The sava-sadhana ritual is a way to consciously and deliberately call the goddess to earth. Proximity to the corpse, with its soul in the liminal state between incarnation and rebirth, allows the living Shakta practitioner to share in the death visions of the goddess as she comes to take the soul to its future life. It is this ecstatic vision of Kali that gives the living practitioner insight into heaven and liberation.

Notes

2. See *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (3.2.13).
5. Ibid., 6.2.13–19.
6. Ibid., 6.2.30–45.
7. This refers to field research carried out in Calcutta and the Birbhum area of West Bengal, in 1983–1984, and 1993–1994, under grants by the American Institute for Indian Studies and the Fulbright Senior Scholar Program.
8. For an example of a description of the ritual, see the sixth chapter of the *Kali Tantra*. The version used here is the *Kali Tantra*, ed. Pandit Nityananda Smrititirtha (Calcutta: Nababharata Publishing, 1388 BS). It is a Sanskrit text, with Bengali translation. The reference to knowledge through Kali’s forms is in KT 6, 21–22.
9. As an example, the sacrificial Meriah rites of the Khond tribals in Orissa are well-documented. See G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 2004 reprint), 31–33.


15. Here Woodroffe also uses the general term for deity, devata.


18. Ibid., Part II, 298.

19. Ibid., Part II, 296.


21. This is a conglomerate story from both informants and literature. For a good middle ground version in English, see Swami Tattwananda, *The Saints of India* (Calcutta: Nirmalendu Bikash Sen, 1950), 87–91.


24. These points have been argued by Jonathan Parry in his article “Sacrificial Death and the Necrophagous Ascetic,” in *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, ed. Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

Samađhi as True Death in the Yogasūtra

Lloyd W. Pflueger

Terror Management

Warning: according to Terror Management Theory (TMT), the following essay could be disturbing. Sigmund Freud, however, believed we could not afford to neglect this disturbing subject matter:

Is it not for us to confess that in our civilized attitude towards death we are once more living psychologically beyond our means, and must reform and give truth its due? Would it not be better to give death the place in actuality and in our thoughts which properly belongs to it, and to yield a little more prominence to that unconscious attitude towards death which we have hitherto so carefully suppressed? This hardly seems a greater achievement, but rather a backward step... but it has the merit of taking somewhat more into account the true state of affairs.¹

Thus, like the other contributors in this volume, I am writing about the least acceptable subject for human discourse, the fear behind all fears—death. Even more disconcerting worse, I examine here an ancient mysticism whose supreme spiritual goal seems oddly similar to the modern secular understanding of death. That the secular, scientific view of death (heart stops, brain stops, and person stops) could approximate that of religious mysticism seems counterintuitive. The acknowledged founder of the current school of Terror Management Theory (TMT) in social psychology, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker argues that mysticism, religion in general, and human culture as a whole are all primarily the attempt to counter our unconscious
terror of mortality through symbolic denial of death. This existential fear of death is made possible by human ability, unlike animals, to symbolically represent to ourselves our inevitable dark future.

In this essay, I will not offer much evidence to counter the truism. Hundreds of studies in social psychology over the last twenty-five years offer accumulating evidence for Becker’s claim that human cultural and psychological life are rooted in the necessity of managing the terror that comes from reconciling the inevitability of death with the desire to live. TMT research shows that people do not much appreciate being reminded of death, and both consciously and unconsciously take up attitudes and countermeasures toward perceived threats to the worldviews that sustain the denial. I apologize in advance for any discomfort.

In terms of TMT, the rarified mystical viewpoint in Classical Śāmkhya-Yoga, as found in the Yogasūtra of Patañjali (ca. 400 CE) seems contradictory, for as I shall explain in greater detail, the summit of mystical experience, though it is the highest goal of human life, comes very close, to our modern-secular notion of death. For the sake of clarity, I will term it true death. Yes, it seems to mean just what we most fear: Blotto. Nothingness. Blankness. The absolute absence of everything, personal or cultural: the whole world, everything we have and know, including our individual identity. In an unexpected sense, this mystical experience of salvation-as-true-death seems to have very little in common with most notions of religious afterlife. It may be that this consideration of true death in the elitist and austere Classical Yoga will illuminate an unexpected meaning even to the secular notion of death as total annihilation, assumed by the new wave of modern atheists.

First we must attempt to travel with imagination and empathy to India, circa 400 CE, and try to reconstruct the meaning of Patañjali’s Yogasūtra (YS), arguably the oldest philosophical text on meditation. As such it is both an elite and archaic philosophy of meditation, never meant for publication or mass consumption. Its deliverances traditionally were the property of an intellectual priesthood (Brahmins) who understood it in relation to revealed Vedic scripture (particularly the Upaniṣads) and the experiences of a succession of master practitioners to whom they would apprentice themselves to “learn by doing.”

Though thousands of contemporary yoga teachers quote it, this text is not to be confused with the comforting stretches and anti-stress doctrines of transnational, modern postural yoga. Its main philosophical outline, the YS, a collection of memorized aphorisms (sūtras), lays
out a complicated theory of mystical realization through the acquisition of meditative states (generally called samādhis). These states (collectively known as yoga) culminate in the final, noncognitive state (asamprajñāta) samādhi defined as citta-vṛtti-nirodha the “extinction of the operations of awareness” (YS 1.2).\(^8\) I do believe this sūtra means literally what it says: that yogic meditation brings the ultimate extinction of cognition itself—all operations (vṛtti, literally waves) of awareness (citta), that is, the extinction of the mind. I realize this sounds extreme, and perhaps, compared to the vast range of recorded theistic mystical experiences, whether Indian or Western, at the very least disappointing, plain, lacking in romance or reward—for the modern sensibility a mystical nonstarter. Likely it would have had little caché even in ancient India, were it popularly known. If it is apprehended as intended, it provokes more the tremendum (terror, awe) rather than the fascinans (love, attraction) which Rudolf Otto famously ascribed to the numinous experience of the divine, as mysterium tremendum et fascinans.\(^9\) Intense meditative mysticisms often defy such theistic expectations in India—Buddha himself described his much vaunted nirvāṇa (which can be translated as dead, extinguished) as apraśīhita, the wishless, in the sense that, unless misconstrued, it cannot be easily desired, and once attained, amounts to the extinction of human desire, itself.\(^10\) Ascetic mysticism is hardnosed and panders little to the pleasures most of us want.

Recently, by contrast, Newsweek ran a cover story about a mystical Harvard academic neurosurgeon Dr. Eben Alexander,\(^11\) whose neocortex, the human part of the brain, reportedly went completely offline for seven days while his consciousness went, he testifies, on a tour of “heaven.” His operations of awareness were not extinguished, he affirms, despite the fact that his brain operations were, for all intents and purposes, nil. (His acute bacterial meningitis resulted in a cerebral fluid glucose level of one out of the normal eighty!)\(^12\) Unexpectedly and out-of-the-body, his mind was revved up into an intense level of experience including higher beings, cosmic butterflies, orbs, and an angelic choir. Yes, Alexander admits to being nominally Christian. However, all this ran, he asserts, quite counter to his realistic medical expectations concerning virtual brain death: dark nothingness, the sheer absence of being. His report, straddling Judeo-Christian expectations and science is not entirely surprising, though many have scoffed at it. But, given our modern mindset, who among us would not prefer a beautiful high definition film of heaven to subsisting in a state of meditative noncognition? Patañjali, the yogin, for one, clearly would
not. He would not only choose the silent sitting, but given the eternal choice of heavenly worlds and the blessed blandishments of divine beings (which his YS does mention), would by far prefer the eternal dissolution of experience in its totality! True death. This choice is not out of nihilism, ennui, or despair, but because, in his view, it offers the highest spiritual attainment: kaivalya, the complete isolation of consciousness. In this essay I will try to elucidate his argument and attempt to reconstruct the ascetic appeal of kaivalya, the mystical, death-like, isolation of consciousness from any and all objects of attention—from life experience itself.

**True Death and True Suffering**

In Patañjali’s philosophy this permanent “extinction of the waves of the mind” is the summum bonum because only the total fading of mental activity isolates and reveals what is considered the undying core, the true person, or puruṣa (spirit, essential life), from the chaff of both body and mind that enclose it. (The problem for us is that this amounts to the extinction of what seems to be whatever is human in the human, the annihilation of ego-identity and everything the ego knows as life—as close to death as a rational unreligious “person” could ever imagine. The hero is isolated from the story! Indeed when the theist (of any stripe) runs toward heaven, it is just this abyss of absence that he or she runs from as well. Hidden in the paradoxes of death as life and life as death and personless personhood as the true self are the clues to understanding this arcane notion of mystical enlightenment and salvation.

Certainly we will see that Patañjali’s focus on kaivalya is far from the notions of modern postural yoga, which carry hātha yoga’s Tantric ideas and practices, largely a quest for power and perfection, merged with the aspirations of European bodybuilding and women’s gymnastics of the 1800s. Yoga studio practitioners too might find Patañjali’s samādhi of true death terrifying. Patañjali does not promise to improve one’s sex life, athletic flexibility, or ability to cope with job stress, and certainly not one’s afterlife. Quite the opposite.

Classical Yoga of Patañjali is at home in an ascetic view of life and death that has more in common with early Buddhism, Jainism, and the Vedantic speculations of the Upaniṣads, circa 800–600 BCE. Here the problem to fix is not death, but life, too much life: too many lives to be exact. Classical Yoga’s theory of the world as a product of action (karman) and reaction, carrying the consequences (often unfortunate)
of every personal thought and deed beyond this life to an endless series of lives in the future, extends the range of suffering to infinity. Here if the terror of death was not bad enough, we have the prospect of endless death (or redeath, punar mṛtyu, as it was first termed). The problem with ordinary death in an early Indian context is that it is not true death, not final—it is the gift that keeps on giving...which to Westerners might sound like a cheerful prospect of eternal life(s) (polls in America today show roughly 24% of the general population, 20% of Protestants, and 28% of Catholics, entertaining the charm of this notion by affirming, contrary to Christian dogma, belief in reincarnation).14 If life were essentially a pleasant middle-class American affair, why not repeat it (especially in higher octaves)? But for the reclusive meditators of ancient India there is a big flaw in life that repeats, compounding ordinary suffering, recycling sorrow, not charm.

For Patañjali, the underlying problem, as in early Buddhism, is that life necessarily entails duḥkha (trouble, pain, suffering, frustration). Patañjali also notes: in YS 2.15 “to the discriminating person the totality of experience is nothing but pain (duḥkham eva sarvam vivekinah).15 The point is missed by most of us, but those who have disciplined the mind and found a taste of mental peace are more delicate. Vyāsa explains: “A discriminating person is like an eyeball: as a fiber of woolen thread placed in the eye causes pain, but not to any other part of the body—so the pains [from the samskāras] torment only the yogin (who is [as sensitive] as the eyeball), and not other people who experience [the world with ordinary sensitivity].” So inner experience of one’s own mind “variegated by endless subconscious impressions”16 pushing one on to further suffering, gives the yogin the motivation to valorize true death. Thus he concludes: heyam duḥkham anāgatam. “The suffering not yet come is to be avoided” (2.16). Mysticism, here, is not so much the flight from death, as the flight from duḥkha, from “being grilled on the hot coals of relative existence.”17 Yogic training, spiritual discipline, is the suggested means of escape.

Many modern interpreters of Patañjali’s yoga (such as Ian Whicher) can find this hard to swallow.18 Religion, especially mysticism, they assert, should necessarily be “life- affirming.” In this perspective it is inconceivable to some scholars that a realized mystic, even in an ancient, ascetic context, would ever teach salvation as final cessation. Naturally it conflicts with modern Christian and capitalist sensibilities. One need only recall the consternation and incredulity involved in the early Western recoil from the concept of Buddhist nirvana as annihilation in the face of the need to see it as some kind of anodyne
afterlife consonant with Christian expectations. Cessation of cognition seems inhuman, so there “must be some mistake.” But of course for the ascetic traditions—cessation is the whole point! It is a coherent position based on direct mystical intuition of ultimate reality, well beyond life as we know it. Not a happy hunting ground.

In fact Classical Sāṃkhya-Yoga did not ignore such escapes from duḥkha involving attainment of power, and pleasure here and later in the heavenly realms, which Dr. Alexander understandably relished. Paradoxically, Patañjali spends much more time and text in the YS describing these intermediary states leading up to true death than that of ultimate liberation. Even aspiring yogis need motivation. When the goal is literally beyond conception, the steps of the ladder must be painted in bright colors.

The preliminary states of samādhi are called samprajñāta samādhi, samādhi-with-cognition [of-objects]. These preliminary meditative and mystical experiences bring all sense perception and cognition to their most subtle and brightest values. What we might call supernormal sensory and cognitive powers: divine hearing, sight, taste, touch, and so on, a vast range of supernormal powers (siddhis) culminating in omniscience and omnipotence are lovingly described, not to mention union with deities—all carrots on the stick. But at the end this kind of impermanent and flashy mystical experience is explicitly renounced for the highest freedom, pure consciousness, true death.

How can we understand Patañjali’s “extinction of the operations of awareness” as a desideratum? Patañjali and his principle commentators go to great lengths to drive home the understanding that ordinary life is duḥkha. In fact experience itself, the excited, functioning mind itself, is duḥkha. Why is this? Thinking, that is, literally citta-vṛtti, mind waves, according to the YS is predicated on a false sense of identity. When identity is misunderstood, there is no possibility of true happiness, just a continuous running—running from pain and toward temporary pleasure and even more frustration. But underneath the dogging question lingers: Pleasure for whom? Who is running? Who can know it?

Erasing the Traces

The mysticism of yoga philosophy is a systematic training to quiet the incessant running of the mind so that the unchanging life, the unchanging light—which illuminates the objects of awareness in their constant pleasant and unpleasant succession in the mind—their
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constant death and redeath, stops in its tracks (samskāras) and erases the tracks themselves, never to be trod again. Parallel to modern psychiatric notions, Classical Yoga sees the perpetuation of suffering to be based on the undigested and thorny remnants of experience, which remaining within the mind, out of sight, still condition behavior. All experience, according to its intensity, leaves these traces (samskāras) within the subconscious—traces that accumulate and arise later as the desires and aversions which basically condition our behavior, actions, and reactions, perpetuating the karmic cycle of suffering.

What remains if these samskāras are annihilated? Only the pure illumination, the pure personless core of the person (puruṣa), just consciousness-itself- without- an-object. This is the death of the human, and the birth of freedom from limitation of any kind. Both mind and body are understood as a mechanical field of action and reaction, shadowing the principle of consciousness, which illuminates them! (Clouds and storm, however dramatic and interesting in their motion, are insignificant compared to the sun that they hide.) More important than focusing the mind in lesser trances, absorbed in objects, and leaving traces, however positive, is the total erasure of the tracks themselves. The final solution. To address this, Patañjali proposed a “practical yoga” (kriyā-yoga, 2.1) in his second chapter for those whose minds are too full of tracks of experience to succeed in stilling the mind entirely. This practical yoga is specifically YS 2.2 “To bring about samādhi and weaken these afflicting tendencies (kleśa-s)” enumerated in YS 2.3 as ignorance (of who you really are, avidyā, the chief problem), identification with the mind (asmitā), attachment (rāga), and aversion (dveṣa), which keep one caught in the eternal round of suffering. To these four aspects of ordinary experience, Patañjali adds one final affliction to the list (2.3), which is very telling: abhiniveśa, the inherent tendency to cling to individual life, which he adds “arises, even in the wise,” who presumably (as the Vyāsa Commentary explains in YS 2.9) can recall and thus ought to recoil from the ignorant attachment to life, which is essentially duḥkha. So even the wise yogins with some practice under their belts and insight into the duḥkha inherent in life have terror of its extinction! Neither book knowledge nor past life recall get rid of the fear of death. In fact, they are more likely to augment it. The specific enumeration of this terror of death among the five general afflictions of human experience support the severity of yogic understanding of true salvation: everything must go! Our attachment to life itself, life as an individual mind/body complex must finally die, so that nothing at all is reborn. Yoga proceeds systematically through
meditative training to erase the tracks of experience: both painful experiences and pleasurable experiences, by carving an even deeper track, which is understood to annihilate them. These new tracks are made of the deepest possible “experience,” non-experience, the total quiescence in noncognitive (asamprajñāta) samādhi.

So if that which can die, the misconstrued human identity, must die for good, what was or is really alive? The personless seer, consciousness itself as a separate faculty, beyond all mental motion, all mentation, is that which is free of change and free of suffering. In essence this is the only thing (though it is not technically a thing) that is alive, for the nature of this seer is not consciousness of anything, but the “seer in its own form” (draṣṭuḥ suvārūpe) YS 1.3. 22 At the core, as it were, of something constantly changing, transforming, dying again and again, the mind–body complex (both gross and subtle) is a principle that paradoxically does not. And it is awake, aware, that is, alive. This consciousness is not the sum of thoughts, memories, mental objects, but only the ultimate principle of subjectivity itself, pure awareness. This the YS calls the ultimate Seer. The mysticism of “Seeing the Seer,” experiencing the principle of pure life beneath the constant change, the constant death, amounts to the death of the mechanical operations of the mind in service of a false self, a false image of what is living, what is life, what is actually “human” in a human being. This is the big turnaround, the mystical paradox hidden from ordinary thought. The death of the motions of the mind is the pure experience of motionless Being, conscious, unlimited, unchanging. It is however not as reflexive as it sounds. The ultimate subject, pure (nonintentional) consciousness, cannot become an object—an object of consciousness—any more than a knife can cut itself. The “Seer in its own form” is both less and more than it sounds.

This mystical experience represents Death with a capital “D,” True Death. Pure Consciousness, puruṣa, is one without a second, without an object. As Patañjali describes it, this is the ultimate mystical experience, the goal of all yogic striving, the only release from all human suffering. It is nondual awareness (without an object). Though Patañjali’s Sāṃkhya philosophy postulates a strict dualism of matter and spirit; the problem, as Patañjali sees it, is that matter and spirit get as if entangled and suffering arises from this seeming mental superposition (saṁyoga,) of the two. 24 The solution, though it takes a great deal of disciplined training to achieve, is ultimately simple, the isolation of the seemingly (phenomenologically) entangled elements. Nonconscious matter (prakṛti), the mind/body complex and
everything it experiences, must be separated experientially from the eternally conscious core, itself undivided, simple, and pure, which illumines the mind as the impersonal Observer. Matter here means all cognition—all mental concepts, all memories, feelings, sensations, all thought—anything that changes, anything that can act as an object to pure awareness. When the motion of the mind is brought to a standstill in deepest samādhi, then the apparent entanglement of consciousness and objects of consciousness is sorted out; what is left is the pure subject—conscious peace: beyond time, thus eternal; beyond space, thus everywhere and nowhere; not afloat in a cosmic choir, not hovering in the presence of the Lord or uniting with Deity. Mystically what does that leave us? Phenomenologically there is only consciousness in its own form, in its inherent nature. In this principle there is no possibility of suffering, frustration, or ignorance. If it is joy, it is a joy defined negatively, as absolute absence of change and thus of suffering of any kind. If it is light, it is the light of consciousness, not of photons real, imagined, or remembered, but the light that is the absence of physical or mental light. The ultimate state of meditative absorption, asamprajñāta samādhi, is the final death of the mind, the ego, all subject/object bifurcation. It is the death of duality. According to one of the earliest Upaniṣads, the Brhadāranyaka (1.4.1): “Fear, indeed, is due to duality.” This conscious nondual sort of death is not an image or a representation of self, (one struggles for words), not knowledge, but knowingness itself, itself, knowing but unknown. The hero who conquers death is true death itself, eternally alive. It is the Ultimate Mystery without a question mark. As such the highest mystical experience in Yoga Philosophy cannot be really desired or comprehended by the mind. What could it be? There is no possible mental answer. We only know apophatically what it is not: not suffering, not changing, not a thing, not a thinker, not a human, not a body, and certainly not an airborne spirit. We know it logically by elimination. We know it phenomenologically only by being it; and essentially we have never been anything else.

Biting the Bullet

In a strange way, this state is the mind’s greatest enemy, as well as its greatest achievement, for when the mind is clear and tranquil and cool as a perfect autumn day (YS 1.47), the mind is said to slip away as if it never was—just as during the night, wakefulness and then even dreams too drift somehow into dreamless sleep, the inconceivable. This is the
end of suffering, the death of birth and death, and the goal realized for “nobody” by “nobody.” True death is not my death, but wider, purer life, consciousness, without beginning, end, or limit. It is the end of relativity, partiality. On the positive side this is freedom. Kaivalya, isolation of consciousness, Patañjali’s stated goal, the summit of samādhi, can also be translated as wholeness, the absolute absence of division. When all the significant traces of affliction are dissolved into the infinite peace of a still mind, this freedom is achieved.

Sāṃkhya-Yoga analyzes the material relative world as a combination of three metaphysical threads (guna) or qualities of primordial matter. All analysis falls into these three qualities: sattva (purity and light), rajas (motion and energy), and tamas (inertia and darkness). The true death of yogic salvation not the death humanity fears: infinite darkness, dullness, the solidity of a dead corpse, the passive ignorance of deep sleep. Rather this death is the crown of pure clarity (sattva) of consciousness. Awareness does not disappear as we fear, when its objects do. True death is rather nothing but That, a solid mass of adamantine consciousness (minus perhaps the mass).

If you understand my attempts to conceptualize this vision beyond the mind, you must be startled. What an odd idea—the end of all ideas! Surely the mystic Patañjali can’t mean this? Lovers of life must needs be revolted. Academics must be totally offended—the much vaunted pure consciousness, the core of personhood, is hardly a person, has no CV, and possesses nothing. Not even a thought, not even a feeling. It does not live on, neither in reputation nor in children. It is the flipping, the reconceptualization of life and death. The paradox of enlightenment versus ignorance is famously celebrated in the Bhagavad Gītā as well: “That which is night for all beings, in that the disciplined one is wide awake; that in which the beings are awake is night for the sage who really sees” (2.69).

What makes us alive? Cellular division? Reproduction? Desire or will? A firm concept of who we are as bodies in field of change for a self-conscious eighty-odd years? What is the life in us? Patañjali answers, “None of these.” In fact he would explain that the sensation, desire, will, motion, emotion, change, and misidentification of life with intellect is not the life in us, it is the suffering and the eternal death in us. Matter, according to Sāṃkhya, is essentially characterized by change. Change is death with a small d. Identifying our life with that which is nonconscious and impermanent results in suffering. The temporary necessarily cannot satisfy. Patañjali believes in heavens, hells, and mystical unions with divine beings, but knows that these are just
fancy forms of the same old changing matter, *prakṛti*, the same old materialism and redeath.

The life inside us is consciousness, *puruṣa*, a totally different principle from matter, *prakṛti*. Matter, though dead, nonconscious, *seems to be alive*, because it moves, changes, transforms, combines, and recombines. But the unseen background of change is *unchanging*, self-luminous, and thus the only true felicity. Pure consciousness is necessarily the only refuge for itself. In Sāṃkhya-Yoga philosophy matter changes but never *lives*—its activity is “for another”—the living principle of awareness, the unchanging observer. *Asamprajñāta samādhi*, if Patañjali is right, totally disentangles the two principles.

Wrestling with the nonconceptual, Patañjali asks us to imagine a state where there is no sensation, no taste, touch, or smell, no sound, no light, and no darkness. What in most religions and in popular imagination might be considered the ultimate horror, the heart of darkness, the fear (which underlies all our fears) of total cessation of personal existence is for Classical Yoga the only true salvation.

Strangely this state of yogic true death has much in common, as I mentioned earlier, with the ordinary secular concept of death as nonexistence. Both involve cessation (Skt. *nirodha*) of life and all forms of experience as we know it. (A hard pill to swallow.) This prospect is likely the hidden bogeyman underlying, potentizing, all lesser fears. The yogin subverts and reverses ordinary understanding: life and death, for the yogin, switch: eternal lives are seen as hell, and the eternal peace of the purified, isolated consciousness free from the stream of suffering is valued as supernal bliss.

There is one factor that makes all the difference between true death as mystical realization and the modern secular idea of death as surrender to the darkness of sheer nonexistence. The yogin keeps the light on! True death for the yogin is the snuffing out of relative experience, cessation of the rise and fall of objects of consciousness of every kind, but the absence of objects is not the dark abyss. As the introductory verses of the YS make clear, something remains in true death: pure consciousness remains when the operations of awareness cease. As Patañjali notes at the beginning: “Then the seer [i.e., pure consciousness] abides in its essential nature” (YS 1.3). The very last aphorism of the YS, as well, brings us full circle, asserting that for the yogin who has achieved the samādhi of true death, the very material constituents of the mind, having no further purpose, dissolve back into their matrix, leaving the light of consciousness, alone. Matter has bowed out and now there is only unlimited consciousness. Not nothing, but Nothing [material].
Pure, nondual spirit. From a worldly perspective, it is still blankness, absence of everything that counts. From a Śāṁkhya-Yoga perspective it is sheer positive presence and unfathomable peace, eternally impervious to absence, want, anxiety, or terror.

Is all this merely ancient rhetoric? Could anyone still in modern times follow such an extreme path of voluntary yogic death? Though most scholars feel that a continuous school of Pātanjala Yoga, focused entirely on the YS, died out in the ancient past, certainly the philosophy has inspired revivals. In 1926, for example, in a monastery in Bengal, called Kapilamath, yogic master Swami Hariharānanda Āranya had himself walled up into an artificial cave with only a small slot for food opening into the active world. There immured, he stayed teaching by extreme example until 1947 when his mind/body complex brought him, his followers assume, to true death. (This ascetic practice has been followed by successive monastic leaders there all in the name of Patañjali’s kaivalya.)

A final metaphor for the modern world: The system of Patañjali Yoga like the best anti-virus software, scans the broken computer of the mind again and again for malware, viruses, and bugs. The goal is not to just to restore function, but to actually rev up to super speed, superfunction, so that in one final stroke the operating system is uninstalled, the hard drive wiped as clean as snow. The computer screen, as it were, surprisingly does not go dark, but, according to the mystical school glows with a scintillating white light. The previous shifting fields of zeroes and ones were only masking the ultimate, which remains safely beyond computation. Pure electricity in its own form. Go Figure. Or better—don’t. Above all don’t worry about this white death—according to the YS those who have not installed the anti-virus software by rigorous and regular long-term practice and detachment, regularly and over a long period of assiduous practice, will not be entering the brilliance of true death any time soon. Death be not proud. This gives a new meaning to John Donne’s effort. “Death be not proud...Death thou shalt die,” but for Patañjali true death, puruṣa, found in the kaivalya of asamprajñāta samādhi is the only principle that paradoxically was never born and cannot die. As egoless victor, it has no capacity for pride.

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,
For, those, whom thou think’st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,  
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,  
Rest of their bones, and soul’s deliverie.  
Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poyson, warre, and sickness dwell,  
And poppie, or charmes can make us sleepe as well,  
And better then thy stroake; why swell’st thou then;  
One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.33

Notes


2. Becker won the 1974 Pulitzer Prize for this work.


4. The YS in its final edition that we know today probably dates to ca. 400 CE, though in this form it seems to be an amalgam of possibly much earlier views on spiritual discipline edited together at this date. In its original aphoristic Sanskrit form it is almost unintelligible (like many such originally oral works of philosophy) in sūtras meant as outlines to be memorized for later unpacking and discussion by commentaries. The oldest and most authoritative commentary unpacking the YS is that of Vyāsa (ca. 500 CE).


6. The keepers and practitioners of this priestly knowledge were patriarchal—priests were exclusively male in the orthodox tradition. For that reason I refer to yogins (male) rather than yoginīs (female). This is not to exclude the possibility in ancient times of female practitioners of yoga in its various forms, particularly in Tantric yoga, where they are welcome. The likely situation with Classical Yoga is reversed today in modern postural yoga as a transnational phenomenon whose practitioners are predominantly women.

7. Not to imply that there is anything wrong with modern forms of yoga practice, but to accentuate that modern forms are quite unlike those enunciated in the YS, in context, goals, and practices. See Strauss, De Michelis, and Singleton for
useful overviews of the modern appropriations of yoga, currently still gaining in popularity and little concerned with spiritual enlightenment and austerity envisaged by Patañjali.

8. YS 1.2 Yoga ścittā-vṛtti-nirodhah.


10. See Edward Conze’s lucid discussion of the “Three Doors to Deliverance, 59–79, in Buddhist Thought in India (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1967). Nirvana, being signless and empty and beyond desire is very difficult to describe or promote in a positive sense, and as in Yoga Philosophy is not a “personal” state.


15. The similarity with Buddha’s famous first Noble Truth, Life entails suffering, is evident. Though (and perhaps because) a kind of city life and middle-class commercialism was developing in India at the time of Buddha and other contemporary ascetic propounders of meditation, the insight that essentially to live is to suffer, to be frustrated, and to meet a bad and recurrent end was common. In fact both vocabulary and major notions overlap between Sāṃkhya-Yoga and Buddhism, despite metaphysical differences.


17. Ibid.


19. Such as with Caroline Rhys Davids’s controversial and incorrect interpretation of nirvana as the attainment of atta, self, rather than annihilation of personal self. See Welbon (1968) for a long discussion about the history of difficulties of Western scholarship coming to accurate understanding of the notion of nirvana and the debates about nirvana as annihilation and extinction.


21. YS 2.15 samādhi -bhavanārthaḥ kleśa-tanū-karanārthaśca.
22. YS 1.3 *tadā draṣṭuḥ svārape’vasthānam*. Then (consequent to 1.2’s extinction of the operations of awareness) the Seer remains in his own form.

23. Orthodox Hindu philosophies (*dārśana*) involve six schools—three pairs of philosophical systems, among which are Śāṃkhya of Ishvarakrishna (enumeration of the constituents of reality) and the Śāṃkhya of Patañjali, which is also called Yoga philosophy. Whereas Īśvarakṛṣṇa’s Śāṃkhya-Śāṅkhyakārikā, the main text for Classical Śāṃkhya, focuses more on elucidating the structure of the universe from the inner subjective to the outer material, Patañjali’s philosophy in the Yogasūtra uses the general structure of the universe to explain the workings of the mind in *samādhi* in order to experience the cosmic structure, and that which is beyond all material structure, pure consciousness *puruṣa*.

24. YS 2.17.

25. Patañjali does mention god (1.23–29) and union with deity (YS 2.44) in the YS, one of the major differences from the nontheistic Śāṃkhya philosophy it is paired with. Even so deity is mentioned basically as a technique for inducing *samādhi*. It is ultimate *samādhi* that is the be all and end all of yoga.

26. Eben Alexander’s interesting NDE, to be fair, was not just angels and butterflies, but, beyond the heavenly villages of the Gateway, he further describes penetrating to the deepest Core of the divine, where he not only forgot everything about his “personal” life on earth, but also met with a formless, infinite Presence, beyond physical light, in a luminous but inky darkness. As with Classical Yoga (YS 1.27), interestingly enough, he referred this personal, compassionate Divine as OM, the sound he mystically perceived. He also notes that he felt part of the higher realities he experienced, a taste of what might be called qualified nonduality. However his interaction was clearly cognitive, not the absence of cognition, the highest state the YS has for its goal. See *Proof*, 45–49 and 160–161.

27. *Dvitiyād vai bhayam bhavati*.

28. In the *Upaniṣads* the Absolute, Brahman, *puruṣa*, pure consciousness, is often referred to as That (*tat*), famously in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* Chapter 6, as the repeated instruction *tat tvam asi* (That thou art).

29. *Yā nīśā sarvabhūtanām tasyāṃ jāgarti samyamā: yasyām jāgrati bhūtāni sā nīśā paśyeto muneḥ*. The *Bhagavad Gītā*, a major Hindu text, ca. 200 BCE–200 CE, is a kind of Upanisadic summary in verse of major trends in Hindu thought as a dialogue between god in human form and his disciple, during a great epic conflict.

30. Reminiscent of the Northern Buddhist Heart Sutra.

31. The Śāṃkhya-Yoga understanding is that matter, *prakṛti*, has two forms—*mūla prakṛti*, or primordial, root-matter, which is unmanifest and beyond sensory detection, and the manifested sensible forms of matter, which work as building blocks from which the material world is constructed. When the mind has finished his duty, as a nonconscious machine, it devolves, dissolves back into the unmanifest primordial matrix. This seems to be an indication that when the realized yogin dies, the mind and subtle body does not persist to reincarnate, but vanishes never to return to pain. This is *True death* for the relative “individual.”

At Our End Is the Beginning: Death as the Liminal Real in the Art of Frida Kahlo

June-Ann Greeley

Introduction

It is not always a comfortable experience to view the art of Frida Kahlo: her paintings have been described alternately as bewitching, bizarre, brutal, surreal, self-indulgent, seductive, unfathomable, and defiant.¹ Howsoever exasperating or provocative her paintings, there can be no doubt that Kahlo confronts her audience with all the complexity, confusion, anguish, and anxiety of the human condition, which she articulates often with representations of the female human body as it is visited by physical trial and trauma. Kahlo does not accord insignificance or even finality to such trauma: on the contrary, her depictions of corporeal distortion and bodily disfigurement are more akin to visual meditations on the inevitable dissolution of physicality, especially human physicality, and on the pervasive reality of death, the omnipresence of which Kahlo insists on revealing in her art as the signature foundation of all human experience and the preternatural essence of all material existence. Having come close to death (if not actually having died, briefly, to which Kahlo herself alluded in her work) after an horrific accident, as well as having experienced in her life other forms of intractable human mortality such as difficult miscarriages and daily physical pain and emotional distress, Frida Kahlo was sensitive to the lingering trace of death everywhere.² Such recognition transfixed both her imagination and her artistic sensibilities and became the inspiration for, as well as theme of, much of her art. To express that, Kahlo
painted what she knew best, her own self, and devised herself as the text on which she transcribed her distinctive perspective on death, its vibrant constancy, and its liminal reality: death as the mystical portal of the continuum of life. Death was the nucleus of much of Kahlo’s creativity, suffusing her conscious and unconscious minds, for death had visited her at a young age and for the rest of her life she offered death her hospitality, not in a ghoulish or macabre sense, but with the sober recognition of its omnipresence, its omnipotence and its final triumph of defining and expanding the human condition.

This mystical awareness of death might seem somewhat paradoxical since, from very early on, many of Kahlo’s paintings display a rich awareness of the fecundity and the force of the natural world which was for her eternal, certainly persistent, and much more vigorous than human beings. Yet it could be argued that her awareness was focused more properly on the cyclical dynamism of existence, the revolving reality of all that is: the material, notably the human, world was always in the process of dying, of fading away, of dissolving into a mystical eternity, which becomes then the threshold of the occasion of rebirth, or at least reabsorption into the natural world. Out of death emerges life in a joyful cycle of being and becoming. In many of her paintings, Frida Kahlo depicted her own body as the site upon which death, as the diminishing of the life force, was viable, yet from that same expiring corpus she depicted new life emerging, life that is bright and effervescent and plentiful. Thus, in the particularity of her paintings, which always seem so specific to her own story and which evoke a narrative that seems difficult to identify, Kahlo actually expresses a universality that is complicated, raw, and perhaps even dreadful, but unmistakably honest: human suffering is not periodic or inconsequential, and death is thriving within the contours of this living life, only to give way persistently to the emergence of new life as it consumes the old life.

Frida, Briefly

In order to appreciate the dynamism of Kahlo’s art, as well as her mystical spirituality of death, it is important to know a few details of her life since it was her life as a child and throughout her adulthood that would form and fashion her thinking about the human condition and the presence of death within life. The coarse frailty of the corporeal that impairment and death can so easily ravage was impressed upon her when she was very young.
Frida Kahlo was born in 1907, on the eve of the Mexican Revolution, the third of four daughters, to Wilhelm Kahlo, a Hungarian–German of Jewish ancestry, and Matilde Calderon, a Mexican woman of Spanish and Amerindian ancestry. Wilhelm (called Guillermo by his family) was a remote, somewhat aggrieved man, burdened by adult onset of epilepsy that had been deemed severe enough to terminate his academic career in Germany and, humiliated, to send him abroad for his livelihood. He became a brooding, embittered man, haunted by loss and failure and oppressed by the relentless wounding of his disorder, yet it was the invisible wounds of the heart and spirit that were all too apparent to his family, especially to his extremely sensitive, next-to-youngest daughter Frida. Matilde, his second wife and Frida’s mother, was a pragmatic, devoutly Roman Catholic woman who governed the family so industriously that Frida often referred to her as “el Jefe” (the Boss).³ She and Guillermo oversaw a somber, lackluster household with which Frida, a wildly independent, energetic child, was often at odds. As the third of four daughters, she enjoyed a kind of careless autonomy that fueled her actively resourceful imagination but that also bewildered her anxious mother. However, when only six years old, Frida contracted polio, and while her case was localized to one part of her body, it was grievously delimiting and the damage of the inexplicable disease to her child’s body and mind, as well as the struggle of her subsequent convalescence, cannot be underestimated. Frida had been voluble and energetic so that the sudden explosion of polio in her body was overwhelming: the disease settled in her right leg and took on a life of its own, subsumed the tiny Frida into its grip of feverish consumption, and remained with her as an incarnate nemesis for almost a year until her leg became permanently disfigured, withered, and frail. The loss of normalcy, a kind of death of innocence, would haunt her for the rest of her life. Frida remained acutely sensitive to her deformity: in later years, she always recalled schoolyard bullies taunting her with derisive shouts of “Pegleg” as she tried to negotiate her child’s world with an evident hobble, and even while still young she began to assume different sartorial styles to cover, as if to protect, her weakened, emaciated limb.⁴ Kahlo never dismissed this period of her life, nor did she seek to forget the anguish of those years. Indeed, the effect of the trauma on herself and on her understanding of the human condition was potent and persuasive. While at the time she was likely unable to articulate exactly the impression such a robust illness had on her as a child, as an adult she painted two startling images of what she came to realize in her childhood after her bout
with polio: suffering is the very warp and woof of life, and death, a kind of cessation of normalcy, exists as the invisible visible dimension of corporeal existence.

The first painting dates from 1938 and is titled “Four Inhabitants of Mexico.” The picture depicts actually five forms, four quite distinctive images that are familiar to anyone conversant with Mexican culture, and a little girl sitting in the shadows of two of the looming figures. Three of the four forms are fairly prominent and stand in the foreground of the painting. To the far left, there is a rather unique image of the Judas figure that in Mexican culture is representative of evil in the world: here Kahlo has dressed the Judas in worker’s overalls and festooned the figure with wires of dynamite. Next to the Judas and closest to the little girl is the full, more abstract figure of a pre-Columbian “Venus” idol that suggests fecundity and nurturing, and next to her is the eerie form of a grimacing skeleton, familiar from Day of the Dead celebrations and representative of the omnipresence of death. Further back from the three is the fourth “Mexican inhabitant,” a straw man on a straw donkey, in construction not unlike a piñata and representing the simplicity but also (in Frida’s conceit) the vulnerability of Mexico, but affiliating not at all with the others. Between and just behind the Judas and the Venus idol sits a little girl with braided hair, forlorn and forsaken, in appearance very much like Frida when she was about six years old. However, the head of the child is rather large proportionally for the rest of her body, and her legs seem lost, almost nonexistent, in the material folds of her skirt. All five figures seem to exist in a timeless space, an empty and stylized Mexican square over which a blue, cloud-filled sky hangs deliberately, emitting no light or warmth to the vista below. It is a disconcerting and disquieting scene: there is a palpable sense that the wired Judas figure could explode at any moment, wreaking destruction all around its immediate circumference, and the Venus idol seems coldly unaware of the little child, gathering mother though she may be. She stands between the girl and the oversized skeleton, which looks away to the side and seems to gaze out to the viewer of the painting, grinning macabrely and with yellowed cheek bones. The skeleton is the brightest object in the somewhat muted painting: Death is happy and robust. The little girl remains fixed in the shadows, her eyes fixed on Death and it is clear that she perceives that Death is strong and omnipresent even in life, and is not exactly a frightening image but also one with which she hesitates to trifle. More than anything, the painting evokes a deep sadness for the child who clearly is alone with these primal forces and has no loving parent or
caring protector to defend her against their inexorable powers, and it would seem that Kahlo has painted the emotional juggernaut she experienced as a little girl stricken with polio. The Judas figure represents her father, moustached and masculine, but potentially able to “go off” at any moment (a reference to his epilepsy?) and thus not a dependable source of consolation or security; the Venus idol (mother?) is certainly fecund and embodies the primal strength of the Mexican feminine, yet she casts not even a simple glance at the small child and stands only by chance, it would seem, between Frida-child and Death. The child cannot run away since her legs appear nonexistent: she is at the mercy of the primal forces. The painting depicts what Frida-child must have felt and what she came to understand when she was struck by polio, for while she certainly did not die, the lingering effect of the disease, worsened by the ineffectual response of her parents, excited within her a conscious, though inarticulate, recognition of the stark reality of Death, which towers over any human dimension.

Yet Frida must have found the theme compelling for again in 1938 she painted the startling “Girl with a Death Mask,” a painting that more profoundly recounts the experience of her six-year-old tragedy. The onset of the polio virus occurred at such a young age that even as she matured, Frida was increasingly conscious of the rupture in her life that had been the fallout of the disease. From a very young age, Kahlo experienced a fragmentation in her sensibilities and also in her very identity: as a healthy, happy young child, she was known to have been quite active and athletic, a runner and a jumper and a tumbler like all small children. Her joy of living, her love of life, was inscribed on and conveyed by her lithe, quick physique, and, like any child, her identity was deeply connected to her physical form. Once that form, however, lost its ease and control, her identity became indistinct, she was sensitive to a “before”-and –“after”-Frida whose most visible articulation, the body, was no longer reliable. It was frightening but also inspiring, this attempt to construct an identity, albeit broken, with a consciousness of the beauty and the monstrous that must now be associated with human experience.6

The painting is again an attempt to wrest a timeless truth of the human condition from temporal fixedness. It shows a little girl holding a yellow flower and standing in a vastness that bears resemblance to nothing specific and evokes a sense of the universal and timeless as the brown earth gives way behind her to indiscriminate white and blue-hued mountain peaks that conjoin and blend with the blue sky mottled with white clouds, a sky emitting no real light or illumination.
but intimating troubled weather, possibly a storm about to erupt. It is worth noting that the subtitle to the painting is “She plays alone” and the image of the child lost in a vast existential space without boundaries, without protection, without identification intensifies the sense of isolation. The little girl is standing easily on two very strong legs and seems to be in perfect health but her image does not evoke health or wellness. Dressed in a lacy, sleeveless pink dress and barefoot, the child clutches to herself a single yellow flower, reminiscent of the yellow flowers used by Mexican devotees to adorn the graves of loved ones on the Day of the Dead, and her entire face is covered by a death mask, a skeleton face not unlike the skeleton masks carried about and worn by celebrants on the annual Day of the Dead. Kahlo, however, is not simply evoking a common feast day in Mexican culture: she seems to be implying that even as a child she was aware of the omnipresence of Death, that celebrating the dead on one day is but a perfunctory acknowledgment of death as a constant, a quotidian reality. It is telling that, in truth, the mask is not particularly frightening or gruesome: it seems, rather, somber and even melancholy, as if Kahlo were asserting that even for a healthy person, Death is a constant companion, an unseen presence, unless identified, in human life, not a source of great fear but in its inevitability a cause of reordering of life’s meaning: where there is life (flower, child), so death shall be there also.

The little girl has a companion, however, in the otherworldly landscape, the presence of which imbues the scene with another kind of spirituality and the child with not a small degree of vulnerability: on the ground beside the child is a mask. It is a mask that, at first glance, looks more intimidating than the skeleton mask but would have been very familiar to Mexican viewers since the mask is the stylized face of the jaguar, one of the most important and descriptive images and symbols of the pre-Columbian/ Mesoamerican civilizations. The mask is not decorous nor is it meant to be; rather, the bulbous eyes and the snarling mouth are familiar characteristics of the formidable feline and it is apparent that in the painting, the mask and its allusory symbolism act as both defender of the little girl as well as her mystical companion. The jaguar/feline was a totem of enormous inspiration, long associated with magic and the spiritual realm: wearing the jaguar as a mask or in some form on daily attire conjured supernatural protection and the ancient shamans regarded the jaguar as their spirit-animal and spirit- mediator with the preternatural realms. In fact, so potent was the spiritual identity of the jaguar that tribal priests and chief shamans would assume as their own the names and local terms for jaguars and
would even ascribe such names and terms of jaguar to references of local deities and ancestors. Kahlo of course takes the jaguar culture and reconfigures it: not a shaman or a warrior but a little girl is in kinship with the magnificent spirit animal who partners with Death in invoking the true reality that the little girl has experienced. The direct gaze at the viewer is startling and humbling and instructive: Understand what our life truly is, know where true power and permanent force resides in the world of spirit that only death can herald.

Yet it was not until she was somewhat older that the accident that every biographical account of Frida Kahlo admits would finally claim the full measure of her being, the calamity that would determine the path of her life and the course of its artistic expression, occurred. There is the sense that the accident when she was eighteen can be understood as a final expression of the bodily trauma of polio she had experienced several years before, although clearly more destructive and invasive, as her wounded, vulnerable corpus endured another assault from the quickening, assertive world around her, and brought her to the brink of actual death. It was this accident that would complete her recognition of the omnipresence of death and its illimitable power and presence.

The facts are fairly well known. Frida and her boyfriend at the time, her schoolmate Alejandro Gomez Arias, were on a bus going home after having spent a festive afternoon viewing the preparations for Mexican National Day in Mexico City. It was September 17, 1925, a rainy day but most people were in high spirits as were Frida and her boyfriend. The bus was new, made mostly of wood, and brightly painted. As it traveled out of the city, its driver passed recklessly in front of a trolley that was also turning onto the street but the bus driver fatally miscalculated: the trolley smashed violently into the side of the bus where most of the passengers were sitting and crushed the splintering vehicle against a stone wall. The bus disintegrated into pieces and its passengers, including Frida and Alejandro, were thrown violently and ruthlessly about the wreckage: several people died. Among those who survived, there were many severe injuries: Alejandro suffered some bruises and gashes but it was Frida Kahlo who was perhaps the most severely injured of those who survived—although initially, no one thought she would survive.

Alejandro was mobile and so he sought for Frida in the wreckage and when he discovered her, he came upon a macabre, surreal, oddly remarkable scene. Frida was alive but barely; her small, lithe body had been fragmented and lacerated in several places and she
was naked, covered only in blood...and gold! It seems that another passenger had been transporting gold powder in a bag for artwork and when the crash occurred, the bag fell open and covered the supine body of Frida Kahlo. She looked almost ethereal and when several bystanders to the accident saw her, they began to shout *La bailarina! La bailarina!* “Ballerina! Ballerina!” and call frantically for help. Her spinal column was broken in three places; her collarbone, right leg and foot, left shoulder, and several ribs were also all broken. Her pelvis had been fractured as well but the most startling aspect of the whole scene was that Frida had been impaled: a metal rod had pierced her left hip and drove through and out her vaginal area. Alejandro and another man (who might have known Frida from the school) pulled the metal rod from her body, which only heightened the unbearable pain and caused more bleeding and damage. When the ambulance arrived, no one expected Frida to live and she was initially triaged at the hospital: it was only the urgency of Alejandro’s pleading that finally mollified the doctors who then agreed to operate on Frida.

Her recovery was slow, painful, and incomplete: there is the sense that Frida never truly recovered from her accident. She spent a month completely bedridden in the hospital and when she returned home, she was forced to remain in bed there as well for several months, incapacitated by a suffocating body cast that made most movement impossible and incited the pain in her body continuously. She wrote to Alejandro that “everyone tells me not to lose my patience, but they don’t know what being bedridden for three months means to me [...] after having been a real street wanderer,” but then ruefully remarked that “at least *la pelona* did not take me away.” Death might not have captured her but her spiritual sensitivity and her metaphysical consciousness only intensified after the accident. One biographer has written that “from 1925 on her life was a battle against slow disintegration” as Frida was forced to endure nearly thirty operations over the next twenty-five years, operations from which she increasingly did not rebound and that left her in worse pain and suffering each time. Frida lamented to her beloved Alejandro after the accident that she had been “all but left a ruin for the rest of my life (as I) almost died,” and that “in addition to having been pretty mangled physically, [...] I have suffered very much emotionally.” Her several accounts, many of them personal letters to Alejandro, that detailed the excruciating treatments and therapies that she had to endure for her many injuries but that remedied very little and alleviated none of the pain, bear witness to a life lived in persistent pain, a constant reminder of the utter tenuousness of the human body and of life in general.
Yet, out of the wreckage of her body and her life emerged the artist who sought to express in her art not just what she had come to understand after the accident but what she was seeking: integration, wholeness, connection, meaning, truth. It was the accident and the form of her survival from it, her near-encounter with death, that would forever invade Kahlo’s consciousness, would assail her interior life as well as her physical being. As she admonished Alejandro in a letter a year after the fateful day, he might want to rethink his absorption in books and schooling if he truly was in search of the truth of human existence:

Why do you study so much? What secrets are you looking for? Life will reveal it to you all of a sudden. I already know everything [...] a little while ago, not much more than a few days ago, I was a child who went about in a world of colors, of hard and tangible forms. Everything was mysterious and concealed something, I took pleasure in deciphering, in learning, as in a game. If only you knew how terrible it is to know suddenly, as if a flash of lightning lit up the earth. Now I live in a dolorous planet, transparent like ice; but which conceals nothing, it’s as if I had learned everything in seconds, all at once.13

It is a curious twist for someone who has experienced a kind of mystical illumination to speak in such a melancholy tone about her moment of enlightenment but it was not, it seems, because what she came to understand was so very cheerless or dismal—although certainly the innocent frivolity of youth was gone forever—but because she was no longer on a journey of discovery, the thrilling quest for truth, peering behind the lifted veil of quotidian existence to gaze upon the unutterable Real. As she noted, “in seconds” or “as if in a flash of lightning,” the Real had been revealed to her and never again would she be able to dwell in illusion or magical thinking: the world had become as “transparent like ice,” evident and clear, revelatory in its translucence.

Thus, her illuminating brush with death and the constant reminder of that experience with daily doses of pain and anguish led Kahlo to understand the most salient truth of human existence, that is, the ubiquity of Death in this material life, and Death not as an obstacle but as a potential gateway to deeper understanding. The persistence of pain, the anguish of a body not in her control and not at peace, not only transformed her but altered her locus of vision: Kahlo would look out onto and into the world not from the commonplace sites of studio and workshop (although she did that, at times, as well) but rather from her bed. Of course, a bed is symbolic of both creation and death: it is often the place wherein life is first created yet it is also the
place in which the dead are placed for viewing and memorializing (in the first half of the twentieth century, many cultures still commemorated the dead from home) and for Frida Kahlo, after the accident, her bed took on new meaning. It transformed from a place of dalliance and temporary repose to the sure locus of security and safety, since it was one of the only places in which she could discover respite, even a reprieve, from her constant ache: indeed, she was often mandated by doctors to remain in bed for long periods of time to relieve the stress on her vulnerable body. It was also where she produced many of her paintings, since standing, or even sitting, for long periods of time proved to be unmanageable given her back and lower torso injuries. Her bed became the locus of rumination and reflection, the place and space of her inspiration, her anguish, her creativity, and her reconciliation with death. The bed was her link to reality, it is where she felt most herself, and where she could best recognize herself as a human being who had endured a lifetime of corporeal betrayal and assault, a woman who had endured, even persevered, despite decades of systemic torture by grotesque and permanent pain. It was from that bed that she painted most of her most famous (and infamous) works, many of which include her meditations on Death, her constant companion and source of solace.

One of the most important of the paintings is “The Dream” (1940). The painting, “The Dream,” transposes her actual bed into an ethereal funeral bier as her sleeping or dead body is elevated through lavender and white clouds from the quotidian into the celestial realms. She seems at peace as her resting body becomes entwined by green vines and leaves, a common motif in many of her paintings. The vines are miraculous: they appear to emerge living and vibrant from the suture-like, inanimate embroidery on the yellow bedcover, and although having been pulled, seemingly, from their roots, which trace the foot of the coverlet, the vines produce a relentless growth of leaves and blooms, life that continues after death, or a kind of eternal form that exists despite the death of the terrestrial entity. The vines are not frightful or smothering; rather, they provide a kind of garland for her sleeping—or dead—body, but it is clear that at some point, her slight physical frame will be subsumed by the verdant growth and the world of nature will replace the human, as if to restore the proper order to the material world.

The Frida form, however, is not alone in the bed for above her body atop the bed’s canopy rests an extremely large Judas skeleton, her death-mate, wrapped with explosives on the legs and lower torso
and holding a fresh bouquet of lavender and mauve colored, lily-like flowers. The Judas skeleton is Frida’s death-mate, the persistent presence in her life, and stares out directly from the painting, demanding and fearless, grinning a slightly macabre smile as if to assert that Death will always triumph over life, that Death is partnered with life and possesses a strength that no human form can withstand. It suggests as well a will, signified by the explosives, that allows no obstacles: Death can “explode” a life when it will, suddenly and without warning, as Frida herself understood all too well. The Judas skeleton has an arm slightly raised as if in greeting, a gesture that suggests that Death is not evil or diabolical, at least not in Kahlo’s estimation. Death, whom she acknowledged she had encountered early in her life, appears resilient, hardy, though a skeleton, and bids the viewer to follow his/her lead, offering transit to another living reality. All are welcome. Ultimately, the human body is insubstantial and fated to decay and with this painting Kahlo presents a meditation on her own death (either actually experienced or imagined). Her physical being is at last calm in a peaceful tranquility, after a lifetime of agonizing pain and restless discomfort. The yellow bedcover, embroidered with vines, represents her own sutured and stitched corpus: yellow, that paradoxical color, symbolic of both life and death, testifying to the broken, seemingly barren, inept, and awkwardly mended body that now in its metaphysical, transcendent state is abundant, fertile, life-giving with a bounty of plentiful growth. Kahlo presents death as the arena of transference, the condition of being that yields to another kind of life, to reconnection with the natural world in the perpetual cycle of life as well as to the deep Mystery of all existence.

The presence of death had become so commonplace for Kahlo that death had lost its seeming infrequency, irregularity, or astonishment and was an abiding truth, a breath away from diurnal reality. In 1943 she painted another self-portrait (since she was so often confined to her bed, there were few other objects available for portraying other than herself and items in her room), aptly titled “Thinking about Death.”

Beautifully coiffed and regal in stature, Kahlo captures the gaze of the viewer with an unyielding defiance that is both arresting and intimidating. She is calm, almost serene, and undaunted, and she asserts that the focus of the painting is not expressly herself but rather the prominent medallion—or third eye—centered on her forehead. The image within the medallion is that of a skull and crossbones set in an open, mountainous terrain that could be a Mexican landscape and obviously
represents her constant consciousness of death, of the imminence of
dead in all life. The ashen colors and muted landscape of the medallion image stand in sharp contrast to the lush, leafy vegetation and
spiny vines that completely fill the backspace of the painting behind
the portrait of Frida. It is a complex narrative that Kahlo has created:
she is both defying common expectation by insisting on the reality of
death even amid such lavish verdancy, and thus her haughty gaze, as
well as interrogating cultural norms by situating death within a tropical lushness, albeit precarious in its barbed accidents. With that, Kahlo
is also maintaining her perception of life as a balance of harmonized opposites: within death there is a perpetuation of life and within life
here is the manifestation of death. The thorns verify that lush life of
the vines is not a simple assumption and that interwoven amid the
growth are those incidences of decay and loss. Moreover, the prominent display in the portrait of vines of thorns about Frida’s neck and
head evokes a conscious recognition of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ
and the spiritual mystery that his torture (the “crown” of thorns) and crucifixion, the breaking of his body, resulted in resurrection and eternal life for all.

With her art, Kahlo relieved the corporeal as well as spiritual strain
she endured most of her life by sharing with others her truth about
the human condition: the inexplicable persistence of living, though
broken and dislocated, within the awe-filled omnipresence of Death. She was not careful with her audience nor did she seek to save her
viewers from the difficult questions and the more difficult realities
her art evokes since she did not try to protect herself from those chal-
lenging and intractable truths of human existence. As a survivor of
several traumatic events that seared their impression on her heart and
mind, the most memorable of which caused her to realize Death as a
constant, but not terrifying, partner in the dance of life, Frida Kahlo
transformed her art into a spiritual narrative and admonition for the
uninformed. Her art, admittedly, was and remains rather inexplicable
to those without such experiences, to those whose lives and bodies are
yet whole and who have not encountered death, and to those without
the will to see. In order to break that will, to demolish spiritual barri-
ers and tear away emotional walls that obstruct understanding, and in
recognition of her terminal sentence that actually liberated her from
the usual etiquette of art, Kahlo used herself and her frail humanity
to fashion works of art that brought into distinct focus the haunting reality of a preternatural Presence just alongside this waking existence.
The last words that Frida wrote in her journal were set down shortly
before her death on July 13, 1954, in her beloved home in Coyoacan, Mexico, and just after she had been released from the hospital for yet another troubling ailment. She wrote: “I hope the leaving is joyful and I hope never to return.” With such a statement, Kahlo might have been simply recording what she hoped would be her final visit to the medical center in Mexico City, and some scholars admit that such a simple sentiment might be partially true. However, this comment was followed a few pages later in the same journal by what would be her final painting, and combined, they seem to express a conclusive transition Frida had made in her life to step into the abiding Reality that had been for so long an animating force in her life. The final painting is possibly unfinished and somewhat inchoate but quite emotional, even vibrant. On a pink background not unlike a pink-hued heaven, a crowned figure is rising, clad in black leggings and aloft on mighty green wings, from a grounded locus of green and blue, filled with drops of water and azure clouds. The winged figure rises, with its arms loosely bent toward its waist, and seems to be moving with some haste, leaving behind the green and blue world as it ascends into the celestial pink realm. The figure may be simply an angel, perhaps an angel of death, but there is one final detail that suggests another possibility. The face of the winged creature is somewhat simplistic, even naively drawn, but it is quite possible to detect on the face dark, focused eyes that stare out directly into the heavens and the slight curve of the mouth, a trace of a smile of joy. A joyful leaving, indeed.

Notes

1. The critical reception of Kahlo’s work has been fraught with ambiguity, personalism, and contradictory impulses. For more than a generation after her death, Kahlo was not even included in the notables of Mexican art: a standard text such as Justino Fernandez’s A Guide to Mexican Art (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1969), for example, does not even name her as a painter, although her husband, Diego Rivera, receives several laudatory sections. The publication of writings about Kahlo, her life, and her art by art historian Hayden Herrera in the 1980s generated a renewed interest in Frida Kahlo, in North America as well as in her native Mexico: nevertheless, even then, analysis of her work inevitably became suffused with emotional responses to her as a person, as a woman, and to the life she so defiantly chronicled in her art. Thus, no less a comrade, fellow-Mexican and artistic luminary as Octavio Paz described in a single essay Frida Kahlo as “limited and intense,” “brave and narcissistic,” “an intense visual poet” whose visions were “often incorrect” (sic) and “a perverse little girl.” He additionally described

2. The term “near-death experience” was of course not prevalent in Kahlo’s time but her sense of having undergone a transformative physical, cognitive, and spiritual experience during the accident is evident in much of her work which is where she best expressed her perceptions. For example, a retablo that Kahlo repainted as her “description” of the accident shows her damaged and inert body lying lifeless under a trolley car while on the upper left corner of the painting appears an image of the Virgin Mary (in this case, the Virgin of Sorrows) encased in a beatific aureole and seeming to be about to raise Kahlo out of the twisted wreckage and into the light of life. It is a small tableau but clearly heartfelt and clearly alludes to a transposition of sense and spirit just after the event of the accident. As is traditional with Mexican retablos, the holy personage who has been represented—in this case, the Virgin Mary—is addressed and thanked for a benefice, and in this case, Kahlo’s parents give thanks to the Virgin for having saved their daughter from final death. See Hayden Herrera, Frida Kahlo: The Paintings (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 34. On Frida’s sense that she had died during the accident, see Hayden Herrera, Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo (1984; reprint New York: Perennial, 2002), 50.


8. Ibid.


15. The color yellow varies in signification, depending on its use and/or its provenance. For much Western, especially religious, art, yellow can symbolize either divinity, life, or fruitfulness, revealed truth, marriage, and joy, or, more negatively, heresy, treason, deceit, and falsehood. See Gertrude Grace Sill, *A Handbook of Symbols in Christian Art* (New York: Collier Books, 1975), 30. In addition, different cultural and religious traditions regard yellow distinctively: in some countries of the Middle East and Southeast Asia, such as Egypt or Burma, yellow signifies death and mourning, and in western Europe during the Middle Ages, actors who were portraying the dead would wear yellow.
18. Ibid. For the ambiguity of the final statement in Kahlo’s journal, see the commentary by Sarah M. Lowe in *The Diary*, 285.
19. Ibid., 198–199.
Modern Requiem Compositions and Musical Knowledge of Death and Afterlife

Martin J. M. Hoondert

Introduction

In this chapter, I shall explore several Requiem Masses from the second half of the twentieth century onward. The questions I want to address are: Which views of death and the afterlife can be heard in these compositions? Do contemporary Requiem Masses reflect the way death is experienced as it is embedded in our culture? I will successively discuss the Requiem Masses by Rutter (1985), Penderecki (1980–2005), and Jenkins (2004). Each of these Requiem Masses will be dealt with from the perspective of the central question: Which elements of the texts used and the music composed are characteristic and contribute to a view of death as experienced by the listener?

The “classic” Requiem Mass as we know it from Gregorian chant originated in the Carolingian Empire. For quite a while, however, the texts of the chants were not fixed, as a result of which we may come across variations in these texts in ancient manuscripts. It was not until the Council of Trent (1545–1563) that the Requiem texts were fixed and prescribed for the whole Roman Catholic Church.

The first still extant polyphonic setting of the Requiem Mass dates from 1461 or 1483: it is a composition by Flemish composer Johannes Ockeghem on the occasion of the death of Charles VII (†1461) or Louis XI (†1483). Ockeghem sticks very closely to the chant, maintaining the Gregorian melodies as part of his polyphonic composition, usually in the upper voice. We speak of a plain chant Mass.
The Gregorian Requiem Mass and the polyphonic settings were used in the Roman Catholic liturgy at funerals, at commemorations, and on All Souls’ Day (November 2). Mozart’s Requiem (1791) may have been the first Requiem Mass to be performed outside a church, when Baron Van Swieten organized its performance for the benefit of the composer’s widow and children in January of 1793 in Vienna. Later Requiem Masses, for example, those by Berlioz (1837), Verdi (1874), Britten (1962), Ligeti (1965), Penderecki (1980), and Webber (1984) were composed for the concert hall, not for the church. The transfer from the church building to the concert hall gave composers leeway to abandon the prescribed Latin texts and to draw up their own Requiem Mass text. No longer bound by the prescribed texts, composers leave out parts of the original Latin texts (e.g., Fauré, Duruflé), use texts from other sources (e.g., Brahms), or combine the Latin texts with texts from other sources (e.g., Britten, Jenkins).

**Methodological Remarks**

Composing a Requiem Mass, I argue, is an attempt to communicate and interpret life and death experiences. I am prompted to this assertion by a statement made by composer Gabriel Fauré, who composed the first version of his Requiem in d minor between 1887 and 1888. Perhaps Fauré was inspired in his work on the Requiem by the deaths of his father in 1885 and his mother in 1887. But he worked on it, he said, with great pleasure. In reference to the Requiem, he said in an interview: “That is how I see death: as a joyful deliverance, an aspiration towards happiness beyond the grave, rather than as a painful experience.”

The way the composer deals with the text reveals his view of death and afterlife. In a way, a polyphonic setting of the Requiem Mass is a statement made by the composer but no doubt one that is influenced by the cultural views of death and afterlife prevalent in the world around him. Behind this assertion, an important theoretical question appears that needs to be dealt with first: Is music capable of communicating a view of death? In other words, we are asking whether music has a referential or narrative potency. Is music about something, or, to cite the title of a book by Peter Kivy, do we have to confine ourselves to Music Alone? Philosophy of music teaches us that there is no direct relationship between the tones on the one hand and objects or concepts of the reality we live in on the other. The meaning of music is a matter of interpretation, but in the case of the Requiem Mass the texts and the
context play an important role. Although many composers, singers, and listeners do not identify with the Christian content of the Requiem Mass, they do recognize the Requiem Mass as “an intercultural symbol of death and mourning in music.” My thesis is that in the case of the Requiem Mass music is able to point to or to evoke extra-musical concepts. The meaning of a concrete Requiem Mass arises from the musical experience on the one hand, and the contextual and performative parameters (such as the place and occasion of the performance, the text and the explanation of the text in the program notes, ritual actions preceding or during the performance) on the other.

The view of death evoked by a Requiem Mass always depends on how the listeners put their musical experiences into words, which in turn is influenced by the aforementioned contextual and performative parameters. We always have to ask ourselves whose wording of the musical experience it is that is presented as the meaning of a particular composition. In my opinion, we need to distinguish four different interpreters: the composer, the scholar, the performers, and the members of the audience. In this chapter, it is the scholar who is the interpreter. I am the first listener who analyzes and interprets the Requiem Masses. The process of interpretation is nourished by three sources. First, my listening experience; second, the score; third, written sources on the Requiem Mass: interviews with the composers, explanatory notes on the composition in CD booklets, reviews and introductions to the scores. The order in the process of analysis is important: it starts with my own experiences; interpretations of the composer and other authorities are added afterward.

Contemporary Requiem Compositions

During the last few years I have built up a large collection of Requiem Masses, both on CD and in musical scores. From the twentieth- and twenty-first-century Requiem Masses I have selected three, quite different ones, each voicing a different view of death and afterlife. They reflect eclectic thinking on end-of-life issues in our Western culture.

Rutter (1985): Death Is Newfound Life

John Rutter (born 1945) wrote his Requiem (completed in 1985) with the Fauré Requiem in his mind. Like Fauré, Duruflé, and other composers he felt free to leave out parts of the text of the traditional Requiem Mass and to incorporate new texts. Rutter’s Requiem is not a
large-scale composition. There are two versions: one written for chamber orchestra, the other for symphony orchestra. It is also possible to perform the *Requiem* with piano or organ accompaniment.

Rutter's *Requiem* can be described as a rhetorical, musical ritual moving from darkness into light. Ochs names as one of the constitutive factors of funerals the oppositional setting of symbols, and the same can be said of the Requiem Mass as a musical-ritual form communicating life and death experiences. The meaning-making process is initiated by the tension in the texts, in the music, and in the relation between text and music. In the texts of Rutter's *Requiem* it is easy to indicate where the tension lies. Three parts of the text bring about a transformation from darkness into light: the two psalms and the Agnus Dei. First, there are the two psalms (parts II and VI). The first one is Psalm 130, a moving prayer for mercy and salvation ("Out of the deep have I called unto thee, O Lord"). This psalm contrasts with Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd," a psalm of trust and comfort. Between these two psalms we find part V: the Agnus Dei. In this part, a textual transformation takes place. As part of the Agnus Dei, three funeral sentences of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* are included: "Man that is born", "In the midst of life we are in death," and "I am the resurrection." The first two sentences are about human life and mortality. The third sentence is about life after death in Christ. The perspective moves from death to life. After this shift, the choir can sing Psalm 23, the transformation of darkness into light has been completed.

Rutter composed a symmetrical structure. Parts I and VII are taken from the traditional text of the Latin Requiem Mass: *Requiem* and *Lux aeterna*. Parts II and VI are psalms, in English. Parts III and V consist of prayers to Christ (Pie Iesu and Agnus Dei). In the middle we find the Sanctus (part IV), a majestic piece of music, extolling God's glory in heaven. Despite this structure, with major attention being drawn to the majestic part IV, the central point of the composition, in my opinion, is to be found in part V. As we have seen in the analysis of the text, we may consider this part as a turning point in the *Requiem*. In part V the texts pray for rest for the deceased ("Agnus Dei, dona eis Requiem"). And then, introduced by the Paschal sequence *Victimae Paschali laudes* played by the flute, the choir sings the text from the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*: "I am the resurrection." From that point onward the text sings of light, salvation, and comfort.

So far we have emphasized the tension in the texts of Rutter's *Requiem*, which is intensified by the structure of the whole composition.
Text and structure communicate a view of death influenced by the Christian faith in Resurrection. Although death is taken seriously, it is not a painful experience, but it can be construed as a journey into the light.

Analyzing the music, we find there are three remarkable decisions made by the composer that convey the life, death, and afterlife experience laid down in the text and the structure. First, the harmonic style is completely tonal, moving from G major (part I), to C major (parts II, IV, V, and VI), and back to G major (part VII). Part III is in F major. The simplicity of this harmonic structure is comfortable for the listener and is likely to provide a feeling of stability. An example of this stability is the sustained ‘g’ as an accompaniment to the main theme of part I (e.g., part I, measures 78–82), which recurs at the end of the Requiem (part VII, measures 107–119). Another example is the sustained ‘c’ in part VI (e.g., measures 5–31).

Second, the tonal harmonic style is enriched by so-called blue notes, also called worried notes. Blue notes are, traditionally, an expression of tamed grief. Influences of jazz, especially the blues, are evident in Rutter’s Requiem. The use of blue notes is most striking in part II: the setting of Psalm 130 resembles the blues, with flattened third and seventh notes in the main melody. Also in parts III (“Pie Iesu”) and V (the “Agnus Dei”) the influence is clearly there. After part V the blue notes have disappeared.

Third, the transformation of darkness into light is marked by an instrumental quotation (played by the flute) of the Paschal sequence Victimae Paschali laudes. After this quotation (part V, measures 66–71), the text sings of resurrection. The musical motif of “I Am the Resurrection” (part V) is the same as that of “The Lord Is My Shepherd” (part VI). There is strong musical coherence between the end of part V and the beginning of part VI.

Through his decisions with regard to text, structure, and music, John Rutter attempts to communicate a comforting view of death. This view, however, is not simply communicated, but is achieved by constructing a textual and musical road. Rutter’s Requiem can be seen as a musical and ritualized set of guidelines for inner transformation, helping the listener cross the boundary between “death is death” on the one side and “death is newfound life” on the other. His Requiem is a firm expression of belief in the Resurrection, but this belief is not “cheap” and is arrived at after a musical and ritual transformation. Grief and hope are part of this Requiem, and this fits the sometimes troubling emotions that mourners experience. In his fascinating book
The Theology of Death, Douglas Davies warns against the religious “denial of death.” Death as presented in Rutter’s Requiem is not an “easy” transition, but can become an integral part of our lives through the transformative power of commemorating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Rutter has translated this power into music.

Krzysztof Penderecki (born 1933) completed his Polish Requiem in 1984. The history of this composition is complex and closely linked to the developments in Poland in the late twentieth century. Penderecki first composed the Lacrimosa, in 1980, as an in memoriam for the Gdansk dock-workers who had died during confrontations with the authorities ten years earlier. All the following parts were dedicated to important Polish persons or written in commemoration of historical events. In 1993 Penderecki added the Sanctus, in 2005 the Ciaccona in remembrance of Polish Pope John Paul II. Although the circumstances leading to the composition of this Requiem are fascinating, my interest concerns particularly the final result. The resulting composition is monumental, scored for soloists, choir, and large orchestra.

Penderecki’s Polish Requiem is an example of the politically engaged Requiem Masses emerging in the twentieth century. As a result of the transfer of the Requiem Mass from the church building to the concert hall its function has changed. The original liturgical function was intercession on behalf of the dead. In the twentieth century we encounter Requiem Masses commemorating the victims of the First or Second World Wars or other confrontations where great numbers of people were killed. Wolfgang Marx, in an overview article of modern Requiem compositions written in commemoration of such events, characterizes the Requiem Masses of the twentieth century as powerful vehicles of social and political critique.

Although the Polish Requiem is a politically engaged Requiem Mass, commemorating the suffering of the Polish people during the communist regime, it has its own particular artistic value. Penderecki himself rejected the reduction of his work to the political and historical contexts for which it was composed. In his Five Addresses for the End of the Millennium he writes: “Works like the Polish Requiem—even though they have their independent artistic life—are liable to be read as journalism. I do not want these orders to be mixed and I do not wish that music, though written at a specific moment of time, to be seen as a background for anything else, because this would make
it shallow.” In an interview in *La Scena Musicale*, he states: “The *Requiem* is dedicated to certain people and events, but the music has a broader significance.” Penderecki’s statements urge me to take the musical experience seriously and to stick to the musical structure as it presents itself to me as a listener. The version discussed here is the 1993 *Requiem*, performed by the Warsaw National Philharmonic Choir and Orchestra under the direction of Antoni Wit.

From a textual point of view, the *Polish Requiem* is a “normal” *Requiem*, with the exception—not unimportant—of some omitted texts and a change of order at the end of the composition. A remarkable addition is the incorporation, twice, of a Polish hymn, once in the *Dies irae*, and a second time to replace the *Offertorium*. From a musical point of view, this *Requiem* is extraordinary: we hear passages of pure tonality as well as sound clusters and polyphonic atonal chromaticism. It is this musical pluralism that dominates the experience. Penderecki uses many different techniques, resulting in different atmospheres and corresponding moods, ranging from peaceful to chaotic and tumultuous. The musical pluralism makes this *Requiem* a synthesis of twentieth-century musical means, thanks to its combination of tonal and atonal elements. The listeners never get the opportunity to sit back; they are constantly being challenged, from one part to the next, to relate to the music again and again. This commanding effect combined with the length of the composition, taking up nearly 100 minutes, makes the listening process an intensive experience. The musical pluralism can invoke all the disasters, wars, and sufferings of the twentieth century and the composer forces the listener to face them all. The view of death permeating the *Polish Requiem* is that of the confrontation with death in the twentieth century. Even though he is a Roman Catholic, Penderecki is not trying to offer religious consolation to his audience, but he is inviting them to reflect on the challenges of their own historical period. He is not referring to the end of time, but to our own times instead. His approach reminds me of a statement by Saint Augustine (fourth century): ‘*Nos sumus tempora: quales sumus, talia sunt tempora* (sermon 80, 8)—“We are the times: as such we are, such are the times.”

*Jenkins (2004): Rest, Anger, and the Circle of Life*

Composer Karl Jenkins studied music at Cardiff University and the Royal Academy of Music in London. After his studies, he was best known as a jazz and rock musician. Besides that, he wrote music for
commercials. From 1995 onward Jenkins started crossover projects in which he tries to mix several musical styles. Especially famous is his *Adiemus* project, with a predominantly African sound. The *Requiem* by Karl Jenkins was first performed in March 2005 in England and received favorable reviews.

With regard to the text of the *Requiem* (completed in 2004), Jenkins makes two distinctive choices. First, he combines the traditional Latin texts with Japanese haikus referring to nature. Second, Jenkins (like Penderecki) makes use of the old text of the Requiem Mass, stipulated after the Council of Trent in the book of rites of 1614. In 1969 the Roman Catholic book of rites for the funeral liturgy was renewed. The old funeral liturgy that was in place before the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, mandated the use of black vestments and black decorations and the somber and meditative atmosphere of the rite was further intensified by the *Dies irae* sequence. In the 1969 book of funeral rites this was all to change drastically. The emphasis now was no longer on the judgment and punishment that the deceased have to undergo for their sins, but on the memory of the Easter mystery of Christ, which the deceased share in. Due to this substantive renewal, the *Dies irae* no longer is part of the Requiem Mass. It is therefore remarkable that Jenkins in his *Requiem* decided to retain the *Dies irae*.

The combination of the old Latin Requiem texts with the Japanese haikus offers an eclectic view of death. First, there are the texts praying for “rest” (Latin: requiem) for the deceased. This refers to rest as it is used by Saint Augustine, in the meaning of an end to the restless quest and chaos of human existence and finding rest in God instead. In addition, there are the passages from the *Dies irae* dealing with guilt, shame, fear of judgment, and punishment. Third, there are the Japanese haikus, with their images of nature, for example (part III, English translation quoted from the score): “The snow of yesterday, that fell like cherry blossoms, is water once again.” This haiku evokes death as a passing away and reappearing, a recurring cycle, the “circle of life.” Thus, three quite different views of death are communicated in the texts: death is rest in God (a theological view), death comes with judgment (a view in which the incompleteness of life dominates), death is part of the circle of life (reincarnation).

Jenkins uses various musical styles. To trace the different styles we can confine ourselves to the first three parts: the Introit *Requiem aeternam* including the *Kyrie*, the *Dies irae* (verses 1 through 7), and the first Haiku *Hana to mishi* (*The Snow of Yesterday*). The first part is
romantic in tone and is composed in traditional style, as a continuation of early twentieth-century compositions. This part mostly resembles the style of Rutter’s *Requiem*, who, as said before, was profoundly influenced by Fauré. In the second part, the *Dies irae*, we hear a kind of music that Jenkins characterizes as “hip hop music.” The way I experience it, Jenkins here mixes the *Dies irae* of the Verdi Requiem and the “O Fortuna” from Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana*. In the third part, the Japanese haiku, we hear Asian music, adapted to Western, female voices. The different styles of music stand alongside each other, which results in an eclectic sound.

As said before, Jenkins uses texts that communicate different views of death. This is intensified by his use of various musical styles. In my interpretation, Jenkins makes clear that death is a transcultural theme, which is expressed in different languages and different musical styles. In his *Requiem*, Jenkins reflects our late- or postmodern culture in which there are many views of death existing side by side. He has juxtaposed musical styles, texts, and views of death and it is up to the listener to make choices…or not. It is also possible to experience Jenkins’s eclectic *Requiem* as an expression of our not-knowing our future beyond the boundary of life.

### Conclusion: Death Experiences and Contemporary Requiem Compositions

In his study on attitudes toward death in Western history, French cultural historian Philippe Ariès characterizes the stance of the twentieth-century West on the topic of death as a radical departure from the centuries that preceded it. Death in our era has become “forbidden.”

In the twentieth century the subject of death was suppressed, so Ariès argues. The popularity of the Requiem Mass as a genre and the emergence of Requiem concerts as civil rituals to commemorate our dead point to a change in attitude in our contemporary culture. Dealing with death in music and the growing interest in performances of the Requiem Mass are signs of the taboo on death vanishing.

At the same time, the authority of the institutionalized religious views of death and afterlife has declined, and a plurality of views of death and afterlife has emerged. Besides traditional views such as the immortal soul, bodily resurrection, and reincarnation, we encounter social constructions of immortality, which do not refer to a metaphysical state of being. In these constructions, afterlife is “materialized” in
memories, stories, material objects, or biological continuity through children. Yet, it remains difficult to distinguish between metaphysical conceptualizations of afterlife and materialized forms of “afterlife,” due to the emphasis on continuing bonds in both grief and bereavement theories and practices. The dead are incorporated in the lives of the next of kin (families and friends) through prayer, commemoration, memories, or objects that remind them of the lives of their dear departed ones. The boundary between afterlife as real existence and afterlife as dependent on the activities of the next of kin is not always clear.

In my analysis of both the Requiem Masses of Rutter and Jenkins, we encounter traditional views of death and afterlife. Rutter’s Requiem reflects the Christian view and points at the resurrection of the dead. Jenkins’s Requiem is eclectic; it juxtaposes different, traditional views. The musical knowledge these compositions convey is a message of hope of a metaphysical existence and corresponds to the prevailing belief in life after death. According to a survey by Motivaction, 54% of the native Dutch population of the Netherlands believe in life after death, 25% are not sure, and 21% believe there is no such thing.

The Polish Requiem of Penderecki (and the same can be said of the Dies irae part of Jenkins’s Requiem) departs from another perspective. The musical knowledge he conveys is not primarily of life after death in one way or another, but of death, terror, and violence in our times. Penderecki confronts the listener with the raw aspects of societal developments: the history of the twentieth century is also very much a history of death. As such, Penderecki criticizes both the violent character of our times and the way death has been treated in the media during the last decades. British sociologist Anthony Giddens observes there is “a growing gap between the real life experiences around death, violence, illness (…) and the mediated experiences that appear in the media.” The Polish Requiem presents death to the mind of the listener in quite another way than the “popular death” as presented in the media. It is about unfair, untimely death, in contrast to the Requiem of Rutter and the consoling parts of Jenkins’s Requiem, who in the end musicalize death as a positive reality.

Notes

1. P. Aries, Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present (Baltimore, MD: Hopkins, 1974). Douglas J. Davies, Death, Ritual, and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites (London/New York: Continuum,
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5. Ibid., 181–189.
12. On his website (www.johnrutter.com) and more elaborately on YouTube, John Rutter explains his own composition (influence, form, structure, performance, details of the seven parts of the composition). After I had done my own analysis, I watched these videos (October 2012). For the greater part, my analysis corresponds with Rutter’s, but in my interpretation part V of the Requiem stood out.
17. “Pleni sunt caeli Gloria tua.” Note that “et terra” is omitted by Rutter.


25. Jenkins wrote music for McDonalds and BMW commercials.


32. Wojtkowiak, “I’m Dead, Therefore I Am.”


34. A. Moha, P. Waart, and M. Lampert, *De kijk op het leven na de dood* (Amsterdam: Motivaction, IKON, 2005), 3.


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