



Natural Transitions

Volume 2, Issue 4

Conscious, holistic approaches to end of life

Near Death, Our Hearts Rest Easy

Life after Four Deaths

Death in the Virtual World: How Facebook and other Internet Sites Allow the Dead to Live on

Aya Despacho: A Prayer Package for the Dead

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Life after Death



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Spirit Departing
by Patsea Cobb
acrylic



What to Expect When You Die

by Karen van Vuuren

Our fear of death is foremost a fear of the unknown. By the time we reach death's door, most of us in the Western world will have given scant thought to what lies beyond our material existence—because the pursuit of the material has been our primary focus. Religiosity does not necessarily provide us with a roadmap to the afterlife either (although some traditions, notably Buddhism and esoteric Christianity, describe the after-death landscape in vivid detail).

How appealing it is then to think that science might be able to verify the experience of life after death. *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife* by Dr. Eben Alexander has topped the *New York Times* bestseller list for weeks. Even my teenage daughter, who ordinarily would not willingly consume any book about death, was hooked by the title (and it is a very good one!). In passing my bookshelf, she pounced on the copy I had finished reading moments before, then maneuvered herself, nose in book, to the couch. Hours later, she was still immersed in Dr. Alexander's account of his extraordinary out-of-body journey during an illness in which his brain was completely shut down. My daughter's interest in matters beyond this life is emblematic of a growing spiritual yearning within our society to understand more of the non-physical world and, in so doing, remove the fear that stops us both living fully and dying with greater ease.

Not long after reading Dr. Alexander's book, I found myself listening to an NPR interview with Dr. Sam Parnia, resuscitation specialist and author of *Erasing Death: The Science that Is Rewriting the Boundaries between Life and Death*. While Dr. Parnia has concentrated his research on improving and standardizing resuscitation techniques, he has also initiated a project to document the near-death experiences of resuscitated patients. The patients in Dr. Parnia's studies have all "objectively died." Their hearts stopped and their brains flatlined. Paradoxically, even though his goal has been to improve our odds of beating death, Parnia's big take-away is that "we no longer need to fear death." He states this with absolute certainty after hearing countless stories of compassionate, loving beings greeting his patients when they die. In Dr. Parnia's view, death is not so bad after all. The exceptions are patients who have attempted suicide. From those he has resuscitated, reports of painful and distressing after-death experiences are universal.

This issue of NTM includes exceptional, thought-provoking accounts of life beyond our last breath. Christopher Sassano, after four near-death experiences, assures us that "death is absolutely safe." Patsea Cobb calms her dying mother (a near-death experiencer) with a reminder that death is familiar territory. Patricia L'Dara provides comfort to the dying by shepherding them across the threshold. Whatever we believe about what happens when we die, it may be easier if we believe "something" rather than nothing. If we can create our own story—a story that gives meaning to life and makes sense of death—then the realm beyond the veil may no longer appear as a scary void—a great unknown that gives rise to our deepest fears.

Karen van Vuuren

Orphanages Full of Special Needs Children



I'm glad to hear that there is a hospice movement in China (The Hardest Thing: Hospice in China, Vol.2 No.3). Most families care for their members at home, particularly families who are close. There is a lot of emphasis on ancestor worship, respect and honoring. However, in some ways, the dying process is less valued. When I first adopted my daughter in 1995 in China, an exposé entitled "The Dying Rooms" (I believe it was a documentary) had just been broadcast by the BBC. After it screened, adoptive parents from the West were stopped from entering the orphanages. "The Dying Rooms" were where children who were sick were placed to die. It was grim.

Nowadays, the orphanages are filled with special needs children, as the Chinese are beginning to adopt and girls are slightly more valued, at least among the middle and upper classes. So the orphanages, which were filled with relatively healthy girls, are now filled with special needs girls and boys. At a recent China Heritage Camp, we were told that 16 to 18% of Chinese children are now born with special needs. This seems preposterously high, but one breath of China's air will convince you otherwise. Special needs children in China are not wanted; thus they are being abandoned at an even higher rate than girls were, and the orphanage system is building large institutions to house these children. Ideally, they want these institutions to have physical therapy rooms, etc. The tragedy is that now they want these institutions full, so they are taking children out of foster care and placing them into these warehouses.

Donna Class
Boulder, Colorado

Newtown Shooting: The Parents' Rights to Their Dead



When the Newtown shootings occurred, the National Home Funeral Alliance made every effort to reach the parents whose only contact with their children was reportedly through photographs from the coroner's office. We wanted them to know what parents everywhere need to know when children die under these and other unimaginable circumstances: that their children belong to them, not the state; that they have the right to voice opposition to autopsy on religious grounds; that they have the right to touch and hold their child until they are ready to say goodbye; and that embalming is not necessary or required by law in any state. Parents may have no choice about what happened, but they do have the choice to bring their beloved children home to care for them one last time. Please join the NHFA in spreading the word so parents will know that in a tragedy such as this, they have power, and they are not alone.

NHFA Board of Directors

Natural Transitions has always focused on building community. With that goal in mind, our Community Forum page is to encourage communication among our subscribers and within this movement for more conscious, holistic, and greener approaches to end of life. We welcome comments on the articles and sharing news and inspiration from your part of the world! Email your letters to mag@naturaltransitions.org.

Near Death, Our Hearts Rest Easy

by Patsea Cobb

When I was three years old, I died for a moment. A blow to the head knocked me out and my father, a doctor, could not find a heartbeat. I have no memories of a journey to the light—the classic near-death experience. But later in my childhood, when my mother told me of her near-death experience during a serious hemorrhage and miscarriage, her description resonated with me intensely. She had journeyed through a dark tunnel towards a great and loving light, filled with the presence of spiritual beings. She had felt the greatest love she had ever known. I never forgot her story and thought perhaps this too had been my experience when my heart stopped.

When my mother, Rosalind, was in her late eighties, it became clear that she was entering her death passage. She had decided not to treat her many afflictions and opted to receive hospice services. That is when I reminded her, “Mom you have already done this trip long ago. You know how to do it!” She looked at me, puzzled, clearly not remembering. I reminded her of the miscarriage, and how she had described a dark tunnel, then the light and the loving figures who had told her to return to her body because her children needed her. I reminded her

how she had said that returning was one of the hardest things she had ever done; how difficult it had been to leave behind such an intense experience of love! She had returned to her body to raise us as a loving mother in difficult circumstances. As she recalled this near-death experience, she squeezed my hand, closed her eyes, and smiled. In the jumble of medical difficulties that shrouded the end of life, this was the first moment I saw her at peace.

The next time my mother was awake, we found it easy to talk about the end of her life. Our hearts were easy; we could begin to say our goodbyes. Her death passage had now been set in the context of embarking on a long journey. Given our ecumenical beliefs and a burst of desire to stay connected after death, I

could find a way to continue our loving connection when she reached the other end of the tunnel.

At dawn on the last day of her life, I sat in quiet vigil with my mother and asked how I could help. My intuition was to hold her feet so her spirit could wiggle out like a butterfly from a cocoon. Our communion was heart to heart because she was in a



said, “Mom, you know how after we go on a long trip, we give each other a phone call to say we got there safely? I know a few good women shamans. I would like to call one to see if you and I could have that check-in after you have made your journey and have arrived in the realm of light and love.” At this moment, our near-death experiences were very real to me. If we could hold hands here, if we could feel so close without words, perhaps we

coma. I placed crystals in her hands and a feather over her heart. For music, my offering to my equal-rights, fair-housing advocate mother was Paul Robeson’s “Swing Low Sweet Chariot.” When we had spoken of her near-death experience a few days before, I had asked her whom she wanted to see on the other side. She had replied, “All my puppy dogs, my mother, all my family and friends—and also, I would like to meet Malcolm X, as I have so admired his life. As a white woman, I was privileged to work with Martin, but not Malcolm.” So I envisioned her family, her friends, and her beloved dogs, who had all passed over before her, in the light on the other side of the tunnel. Through my tears, I called in all those who came to mind and told them that she would be passing soon and needed friends and family to greet her. During this, the door



Steps to Spirit Passage 1-4 by Patsea Cobb



opened and a hospice team member came in. She was silent for a long while and then softly asked, “What are you doing?” I hesitated, feeling somehow embarrassed to be calling in spirit-relatives for my mother in a hospital setting. She told me that she had never felt a room so full of spirits and that was why she had entered in silence. With her long black hair, I imagined that this hospice worker was of native heritage. Perhaps she understood these things? I was not feeling confident in my spiritual abilities, but I had felt an urgent need to assist my mom. I breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps I was helping.

Alone and in quiet vigil again, I held my mother’s feet and saw her spirit, gathered in her chest, start to spread wings. I grasped firmly, so her spirit could slip out. Again I called in the beloveds whom she wanted to see on the other side. My face was a river of tears, but I was filled with the light and love passing between us. The light within her spread wide around her. At times I felt her spirit gently rise to the ceiling and then return for breath.

Later that day, when her earthly community—a rainbow of advocates and rabble-rousers—filled the room, my mother’s breath slowed and her light

dimmed. Her “lift-offs” became longer as the light hovered above her. The last breath came. We hugged, sang the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which her great-grandmother, Julia, had authored, and we wrote poems of thanks. These we tucked into her pajamas along with flowers from the bedside vases.

Later, when it was time to release her body to fire and ashes, we walked into the still afternoon. A strong breeze rushed from her bedroom window. Without rain, the arc of a rainbow appeared just beyond us.

A few months after my mother’s death, when I ached to simply talk with her on the phone, I remembered my promise to call and check in with her after her journey. Don’t make deathbed promises if you can’t keep them! So, I found a lovely, spirited shaman, who connected me with Mom. The shaman affirmed my mother’s safe passage, and also that she had “talked the sky down” with her mother, my grandmother. To my surprise, my mother wanted to assure me that her feet did not

hurt anymore. I also learned that she was already engaged with ancestor spirits who supported equal rights work. The shaman transmitted this information even though I had told her nothing of my mother’s political activities on earth.

Whenever I think of my mother now, I am comforted by the vision of her at the other end of a tunnel, in light, in community, with a world of loving ancestors. My heart rests easy. 🌈

Patsea Cobb teaches painting and expressive art therapy at Maine College of Art. Reproductions of her paintings are found in the libraries of hospices in New England. Contact Patsea at patsea-art.blogspot.com.

This is an edited version of an article that first appeared in the winter 2012 Vital Signs, a publication of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), www.iands.org. A portion of the story was published in Wild Apples Magazine in 2011.



Spirit Being Greeted by Patsea Cobb



Wynn Bruce

Life after Four Deaths

by Christopher Sassano

This article is an edited version of a talk by Christopher Sassano on his near-death experiences, given in Boulder, Colorado, in the fall of 2006.

My story is a little different from the usual near-death experience (NDE) because I've had four. I was on a roller coaster ride, safely guided through each step by spiritual beings. For me, death was and is an absolutely safe experience.

In America today, NDEs are much more prevalent than most people realize. I didn't study the phenomenon until I was in my forties when I met Dannion Brinkley, the author of *Saved by the Light*, and appeared on television with him. He was a CIA assassin who had experienced the typical stages of an NDE. Then I read Dr. Raymond Moody's books on his NDE research and discovered that people all over the country, medical doctors included, were conducting studies on NDEs, trying to understand them.

My first NDE occurred when I was 11 years old. I was living in a nice, suburban town outside New York City. There were a couple of lots next to our house where all the kids played wiffle ball. Apparently I had stood on a hornets' nest and the insects came flying out, went up my pants and into my shirt. I ran next door, waving my arms and yelling at the top of my lungs. My mom ripped my clothes off, got me into the shower, and tried to drown the wasps. I was stung about 700 times. She didn't call an ambulance. She just threw me into the car and off we went to the local medical clinic.

In all my four NDEs, there has been a point where I couldn't get another breath. At the clinic I couldn't breathe. I was puffing up like a blowfish and breaking out in hives. The medical staff was trying to get tubes down my throat and I was in terror.

None of my NDEs was dream-like; all were very intense, high-energy events that released massive amounts of adrenaline. There in the clinic I wanted another breath and couldn't get one. Then, all of a sudden, everything became peaceful. I experienced myself in the room, my mom and the doctor standing over me. My mom was crying, telling the doctor to "do something!" Later, I was able to recount to them their conversation. I remember looking at the clock and yelling, "I'm fine! Hey! Look! I'm fine!" My body was lying on the table, but I felt completely at peace, within a field of love. I noticed a being off

to my right, an illuminated spiritual guide of some sort. I saw a tunnel of light form in the right corner of the room and then, whoosh!—down we went. In later years, my mom told me I had flatlined for about a minute and was in a coma for many hours before I came to.

The following year, I was swimming off Cape Cod. Suddenly, I was a long way from the shore, floundering and panicking because of the current. I was trying to swim against a rip tide even though I knew I was supposed to swim along with it. Fortunately, a lifeguard on the beach had been watching my progress, and he set out after me in a little boat. Meanwhile, water was getting into my lungs and I was completely stressed out. My arms were like lead and I felt I couldn't move any more. Then just before I died, everything became peaceful (like my first NDE), and I was no longer worried about my body.

I floated serenely above the ocean. I didn't see the lifeguard coming in his boat, but I did see a being of light to my right, and a tunnel of light forming as before. This time I went down the tunnel and met my grandmother and some of my maternal great aunts—people I had never actually met in life because, while alive, they had lived a thousand miles away in Illinois. They had come to welcome me, but they also told me that I was going back. The next thing I knew I was spitting up water on the beach, and people around me were crying. The lifeguard was pumping me out, and my mother was in tears because her son had nearly died—again.

My NDE at age 21 changed me most profoundly. I was living a typical guy's life in London. I'd been a high school jock—a starting quarterback, a pitcher—and my goal in London was to have sexual encounters (without, I might add, any success). It was 1969 and the "summer of love." A couple of the guys and I had tried to meet girls in the clubs—and I had gone to a block party near Notting Hill Gate, where I lived.

To this day I'm not sure what happened that night in the middle of July. I hadn't been sleeping in my flat because I couldn't stand the noise of London. My habit was to jump over the fence and sleep in nearby Bannister Park because no one

ever checked the parks in London at night. (I remember Bannister Park had peacocks, parrots, and all kind of other birds. In the middle of July it's light until 11:30pm, and the sun comes up around 3am.) I'd eaten a lot of fish at the party, so I've always said it was food poisoning. I was very sick with some nasty stomach cramps. I was lying with my blanket, alone under a tree when it happened—I couldn't breathe.

This time there were no paramedics, no doctors, no lifeguards. My struggle for breath worsened. The intensity was incredible. I just wanted one more breath! Then my consciousness split and I found myself watching scenes from my life, moving backwards to my childhood. During this time I was still fighting for breath, curled up in a fetal position. As I arrived back at my birth at the moment of my first breath, I simultaneously experienced the moment of my death because I could no longer get a breath. I opened my mouth to scream but nothing came out, and I popped out of my body.

In my experience, we're not "here" until that first breath. I'm not sure what happens with a fetus in the womb because we can certainly communicate with the soul of a baby before it is born. However, I do not believe that abortions kill conscious, incarnated entities. I learned that I did not incarnate—I did not slide into my body—until that first breath.

Back in Bannister Park that night, I was no longer in my body but standing next to it, relaxing into a sea of love. I knew we all existed within this sea of love and moved within it. This sea was like liquid light and we were like fish moving within it. The light moved in currents like rivers across the earth. Although it was night I could see everything clearly, and I felt at one with everything. The liquid light was dense and layered. Those closer to the ground were less pleasant in color, more of a gray or brick-red as opposed to a golden white. My experience was of being one with God. I felt that the universe had the body of a being and I was a small part of that being.

Within seconds I learned so much about myself; the biggest blessing was to learn that we are always connected. God has



Wynn Bruce

given us the gift of the Heartmind. Our Heartmind is always connected to the great oneness of God, the great spirit world of light-love. It is never confused; it always knows what's best for us. The Heartmind exists, but we are so noisy and it is so still. In our lives we behave as if we are in endless meetings with ourselves. So many people live in their minds, and it is as if they are just visitors to their meetings.

Everything happened so fast. I felt like an atom in this being's body. Light fields rayed out from it, into the distant universe. I could see 360 degrees around me. That was unnerving and I did not like it at all! Then all of a sudden, my vision returned to normal.

During this part of the NDE, there was no tunnel of light, no spiritual being by my side. I was simply in a world of pulsing, swirling colors. Everything—every tree, plant, the earth—had an auric glow, and currents of liquid light moved through them. Once I discovered that I could move, I abandoned my body and started flying around, traveling at incredible speeds. I learned that the birds in Bannister Park could see me because I scared them when I flew about 20 feet

above the ground. The peacocks up in the branches took flight when they saw me. The scene reminded me of a Goya painting with its thick colors. There was a thickness to everything. I became aware of the sun, which I could see right through the earth. The sun had a really strong pull for me. I soared so far up into the atmosphere I could see the whole of England, France, and Spain.

I became aware of a cord that extended from my navel and went down through the clouds over London. Years later, I read about the silver cord, and how cutting this cord signifies death. The cord exists in many traditions, even in the Bible. My silver cord was still intact; I still had form. When I was high up over Europe, my teacher, the light being, came, and I

I became aware of a cord that extended from my navel and went down through the clouds.

downloaded information about myself and our world, seemingly within seconds. It felt as if I were in my ancient home. I knew I had lived many times before and that this was not my first incarnation on planet earth. I became aware of the existence of other worlds, worlds where it was possible to live between lifetimes. I learned that we come here to give our

gifts. Our gifts are not for us; they are for other people, and other people pull them out of us. We're here to learn compassion, truth, sensitivity, and how to listen. And we're here to learn how to love.

The light being who appeared was the same being from my first NDE. We all have a spiritual guidance team and we're their "project." If the team is good at its job, we will not know it's helping us. Anthroposophists¹ believe that our goal is to mature to the point that we no longer need the guidance of this spiritual team. We must establish our own heart-mind connection. I learned that we only meet certain people who are part of our destiny and that we also have a spiritual family. We arrive on earth in groups of 20 or 30 family members. We love this spiritual family dearly and have a heart connection with them that is below our conscious threshold.

After a while, up above the clouds of Europe, my teacher told me it was time to check in on my body. I had been observing the sun directly without burning my irises, and it had a great pull for me. I connected it with the Christ. The next thing I knew, instead of going up to the sun, I was standing next to my body.

When I oozed back into my body, it felt creepy, all clammy and stiff. I sat and cried for the longest time. I had lost all my paradigms. I knew I had been saved from the stupid life of a jerk, that of a shallow American teenage boy. I was 21, but I felt like a high school kid again.

That morning in the park, the light was just coming up as I wandered around. I could still see the waves of light and their beautiful movement. I knew that God existed. When I jumped the fence out of the park, I was in a state of grace. On the path before me

was an elderly lady in a wheelchair, and she said something that made me think she knew what I had just experienced. I fell on my knees, put my head in her lap, and began to cry. This crippled, old woman held me and blessed me.

One negative result of my NDE is that my breathing is messed up. I often hold

my breath, which makes sense when you think of my trying to get that last breath during each of my NDEs. It's as if I do not want to let go of my breath again.

One of the most profound teachings I received was that everything I had learned to that point was either wrong or irrelevant. This so turned my world around that I was unable to return to college. I couldn't do my schoolwork. I couldn't take tests (and I had been good at them). My parents completely freaked out. On my return to Connecticut, I began working in a health food store. In 1969, the state was brimming with amazing teachers, and I was attracted to an Eastern spiritual path. I lived in communes. I needed quiet. No more rock and roll concerts for me. (In London, I had been working for *Billboard* magazine, reporting on Beatles' and Stones' concerts.)

I met an 80-year-old Rosicrucian man, a German, and he took me under his wing. He guided me away from the Eastern path where I believed I was going to merge and disappear into nirvana. I really wanted to do that because every time I died, I merged with the oneness of God and love and light. But the German man told me I was here to stay. He said I needed to learn techniques to be present and learn to grapple with the world. His philosophy was: You didn't come here for a vacation! That was very healing.

I began having precognitive experiences, psychic experiences, intuitive experiences. I moved out to Yosemite on the edge of Nevada where all the gas stations were casinos; we'd go to Reno to shop. I played a little game where I would allow myself one bet. On the way to the bathroom, I would walk by the machines on my left hand side and play the one that felt warm. I won every time, about 30 times in a row. I still have that habit. Brinkley, of course, talks about winning tens of thousands of dollars. Unfortunately, I just won gas money.

Eventually, I joined a spiritual group near Yosemite and studied meditation. I lived seven years in the desert by myself and loved being there. I needed that stillness. I have learned that there are four pillars to the temple, and spirituality is just one

of them. The others are relationships, health/chi, and life practice and work. It took me a long time to figure out some of these. For many years, I was definitely a more incarnated person, always wanting to re-merge with that great life force. I can always feel it and I can feel it in other people. When we die, we realize it was always right there, this Heartmind. The early Christians called it *gnosis*, the part of us that is not confused, that is connected, that knows what we are supposed to do and knows our gifts.

When I was in my mid-40s, I became aware of Dr. Moody's books,² and I started learning about the seven, eight, or nine steps (depending on what you read) of an NDE. I read about the life review and what a wonderful experience it could be. I thought, What a bummer! Why didn't I get to do the life review? I went backwards to my birth, but it was all so fast. Then a week after I lamented this omission to my wife, Sage, it happened.

I began to feel everything I had caused others to feel.

I was now 49 years old and in my backyard, when a bunch of wasps flew up and stung me. Within about 15 seconds, I realized I was going to die again. Yes! I thought. I started puffing up, breaking out in hives, and I could feel the energy pulsing. I ran inside and told Sage what was happening. She immediately said, "We're going to the hospital!"

"No we're not," was my response. "I'm lying down and going for the ride!" When I couldn't breathe, I began to wonder whether this was a good idea. I had given Sage permission to call the hospital if absolutely necessary. Just as I was getting to my last breath, the whole room became peaceful and everything was blissful again. I still couldn't breathe when the being of light appeared. By now Sage had fallen asleep. Rudolf Steiner³ says that the spiritual world operates in what we could call lower theta or the sleep realm. Sage had locked into this when she fell asleep. Most people can't remain conscious when they're in the presence of spirit beings unless they are, for example, trained

meditators. In the Bible, an angel shows up at Jesus's tomb and everyone falls asleep.

When the tunnel of light opened up on my right, I thought, *I don't want to die*. I also wasn't sure I needed to go down it. I saw the floating light field and the liquid crystal light. I looked through the walls of houses into what I always think of as the third or fourth heaven around the earth. I expressed to the being of light that I didn't want to die, but I did want a life review. The being thought this was wonderful. Out of his heart center came a blue ray that reached to my throat and allowed me to breathe. The being asked me what I wanted to review and I said, "All the experiences I've had with women in my life, and whatever else you want me to review."

My life review was like a holodeck: as if I was in a three-dimensional recording of my life. (The holodeck is a technology on *Star Trek*.) During it all, I was in a room and did not leave my body. The tunnel of light disappeared. I was in this third or fourth heaven with the realms of light, and I was connected with God, light pulsing through my heart.

I could see my whole life as if I was watching it in a movie theater. I just slid into the experiences. I began to feel everything I had caused others to feel. If I had said a mean thing and thought, *Oh, they'll get over it*, now I felt what they felt. If I had told a lie, it was as if I had murdered someone. It was soul-wrenching. (Dannion Brinkley's experience is that if you were unconscious about your actions when they occurred, reliving them is less painful.) I have no idea how Dannion ever went through his. I mean, he was an assassin for the CIA; he murdered people! I did experience being nice to an elderly woman and helping her cross the street. I could feel how this event rippled through her life. She was so grateful for this kindness and passed it on to others. I got to feel the repercussions of the time I went into a bank and was rude to a female bank teller. I experienced how she went home and was mean to her kid. She kicked the dog in anger and slammed the door. I realized my action had triggered this.

We all have a spiritual guidance team and we're their "project."

Then we were at the state basketball championships during my high school years. I wasn't a big guy then, but I was still a decent basketball player. In the game I scored 22 points during two overtimes, and my teammates carried me out on their shoulders. Our team had upset the number two seed. When I got to see this, I thought, cool! But the light being told me I had already had my reward—and instead I experienced my seven-year-old sister trying to congratulate me outside the basketball gym. The pretty cheerleaders

were checking me out and wanting to congratulate me, so I ignored my sister. My sister remembers this event vividly, and she was upset at the time.

Reliving these experiences was incredibly healing. Some teachings advise you to do this every night, so you don't have to wait for the big, epic review when you die. Then, before everything faded and I parted from my spirit guide, I was also able to download more useful life information.

As I re-entered by body, Sage woke up. The light fields slowly disappeared, but the auric colors stayed for days afterwards. Then I began to see accidents—playing like a video—before they happened. I would be driving, turn a bend, and narrowly avoid the site of a nasty wreck. I would touch people and know exactly what they were ashamed of or what they were hiding deep down inside. Eventually, I asked for the “knowing” to stop—and it did. Brinkley uses his psychic abilities in his teaching, but I found it too painful to know and feel everyone's pain. I never touched anyone who wasn't hiding something.



Q: Do the dead attend their own funerals?

I believe that everyone goes to his or her own funeral. We're all curious about what's going to happen. When people have died, they are initially in a state of confusion. They're blissed out; they don't yet know that everything is connected. They haven't really learned anything yet from being dead. Just because you die, you don't suddenly become wise. I am more inclined to talk to the spiritual teachers than to my ancestors. Usually, all that the dead can share is how wonderful it is on the other side. They are ecstatic and loving. I think people go to funerals, and then they cross over the energy river around the earth. We used to have names for it—the River Styx, for example. Once you cross it, your life goes on.

My experience is also that the spiritual realms are full of schools and temples. Eventually, you return to your spiritual family whom you love. Not all members of our spiritual family incarnate at the same time. Half of them are here on earth, and the other half are on the other side.

Q: Are there any practices that you do now that can bring you close to that same experience of peace?

I've spent my whole life trying to understand this heart-knowing mind. Over the years, the HeartMath Institute⁴

has developed some practices you can learn, and one of them is to find your heartbeat in a given situation to learn to be present. Find your heartbeat while you're talking to someone and feel that center. I also practice meditations that are centered upon the heart. One of my early teachers gave me the practice of loving God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Q: Can you give an example of a practice we can do for people who are dying?

One of Dannion's techniques for being with the dying, if you are connected with them, is to find your heartbeat, and to slow it down to match their beat. If you have meditation skills, you can also match your breath with their breath, then switch your breath to the opposite of their breath. When the angel comes and the tunnel of light appears, you experience it too. At first, it's confusing, but on this side, you are holding steady, locked into a nice, meditative state. You're rocking with the person; you're breathing with them. You've got your heartbeat entrained. When a parent dies, you can travel down the tunnel of light and hand them off to grandparents or others who are waiting. The person on the other side still feels connected to you, but you let them go. You experience that death is not the end but is, instead, a new beginning.

Two weeks after my last NDE, I was again in the backyard, tossing a hay bale, when out came a swarm of wasps. They got into my shirt and my hair, so I started ripping off my clothes and headed for the shower. I was at the front door with very little on when I realized that the wasps weren't stinging me. Not one of them stung me. Then I heard a voice say, “These things don't happen by accident.” Near-death experiencers say, “I was just minding my own business, living my life, working in the backyard, swimming in the ocean, playing wiffle ball, sleeping in the park—and all of a sudden, I was fighting for my life.” So I will repeat this: Death is an absolutely safe experience. All my NDEs were planned by my spiritual guidance team to wake me up. Each time one occurred, I was in chaos, but these beings were all waiting for me. “Okay, he's almost here! Here he comes!” 🌀

Notes:

1. Spiritual philosophy developed by Rudolf Steiner.
2. Raymond Moody, Jr., MD, PhD, author, researcher into near-death experiences at www.lifeafterlife.com.
3. Rudolf Steiner, Austrian philosopher and clairvoyant.
4. Institute of HeartMath at www.heartmath.org.



Characteristics of a Near-Death Experience

Most people who experience an NDE report it as peaceful and loving; however, some have found it disturbing. Each near-death experience is unique, but taken collectively NDEs often contain common features:

- ✧ Intense emotions of profound peace, well-being, love, or fear, horror, loss.
- ✧ A perception of seeing one's body from above (referred to as an out-of-body experience or OBE); sometimes the individual is watching medical resuscitation efforts or moving instantaneously to other places.
- ✧ Rapid movement through darkness, often toward an indescribable light.
- ✧ A sense of being "somewhere else" in a landscape that may seem like a spiritual realm or world.
- ✧ Incredibly rapid, sharp thinking and observations.
- ✧ Encounters with deceased loved ones, possibly sacred figures (judges, Jesus, a saint) or unrecognized beings with whom communication is mind-to-mind; these figures may seem consoling, loving, or terrifying.
- ✧ A life review, reliving one's actions and feeling their emotional impact on others.
- ✧ In some cases, a flood of knowledge about life and the nature of the universe.
- ✧ Sometimes a decision to return to the body.

A Peaceful Near-Death Experience

The same elements appear in both pleasant and disturbing near-death experiences, but with different emotional tones. P.M.H. Atwater, one of the most prolific NDE researchers, describes a peaceful NDE in her book *Coming Back to Life* as:

- ✧ A sensation of floating out of one's body, often followed by an out-of-body experience where all that goes on around

the "vacated" body is both seen and heard accurately.

- ✧ Passing through a dark tunnel or black hole or encountering some kind of darkness. This is often accompanied by a feeling or sensation of movement or acceleration. "Wind" may be heard or felt.
- ✧ Ascending toward a light at the end of the darkness, a light of incredible brilliance, with the possibility of seeing people, animals, plants, lush outdoors, and even cities within the light.
- ✧ Being greeted by friendly voices, people or beings who may be strangers, loved ones, or religious figures. Conversation can ensue; information or a message may be given.
- ✧ Seeing a panoramic review of the life just lived, from birth to death or in reverse order, sometimes becoming a reliving of the life rather than a dispassionate viewing. The person's life can be reviewed in its entirety or in segments. This is usually accompanied by a feeling or need to assess losses or gains during the life to determine what was learned or not learned. Other beings can take part in this judgment-like process or offer advice.
- ✧ A reluctance to return to the earth's plane, but invariably realizing one's job on earth is not finished or a mission must yet be accomplished before a person can stay in the non-embodied state.
- ✧ A warped sense of time and space, often the discovery that time and space do not exist; a loss of the need to recognize measurements of life either as valid or necessary.
- ✧ Disappointment at being revived; feeling a need to shrink or somehow squeeze back into the physical body. There may be unpleasantness, even anger or tears at the realization that one has returned to the body and is no longer on "the other side."

Whether an NDE was beautiful or terrifying, near-death experiencers

commonly say it was unlike a dream, "more real than real," and the most powerful event in their lives. They struggle to find words to describe it, but insist that they now know something new about reality—that "there's more than what's here" in the physical world. Most people feel deeply changed in their attitudes toward life, work, and relationships.

After a wonderful NDE, people almost always report losing their fear of death and believing that the essential purpose of human life is to develop our capacity to love. After a disturbing NDE, a person will almost always look for an explanation for the experience. Many experiencers interpret it as a threat or warning and so may try to change habits or behaviors, or adopt new religious practices to avoid a recurrence. However experiencers adjust to these personal transformations, they often have difficulty finding someone they trust to tell about the event. They usually feel in great need of information and support.

Nearly identical experiences may also occur when people are nowhere near death, or not in any health crisis at all. These may happen during prayer or meditation, in times of deep emotional stress, or at the bedside of a dying person. Rarely do they seem to happen spontaneously. The general elements and aftereffects are the same as in the true "near-death" experiences. 🌐

This article is an edited reprint, courtesy of the International Association for Near-Death Studies. For more information, visit www.iands.org.

Advice for Caregivers

Caring for the Near-Death Experienter

A “caregiver” in the context of this article refers to anyone in whom a near-death experienter (NDER) confides about their NDE. The first caregiver to whom most NDERs turn is a medical or other health professional who is nearby, within moments, hours, or days of the NDE. Other caregivers include family or friends. Usually, the first discussion of an NDE plays an important role in the course of the NDER’s integration process—a process that research shows can take years.

The following suggestions are offered to help caregivers provide NDERs with the chance to discuss the experience as soon as they are ready and to establish a constructive course of integration. For that reason, it is important to receive accurate information about NDEs so caregivers can establish a helpful attitude and skills.

Research indicates that as many as 5% of the adult US population has had a near-death experience. The content of the experience can range from extremely pleasant to mildly to extremely distressing, involving feelings of guilt, remorse, fear, confusion, or resistance; profound isolation; or, most rarely, hellish settings. In the aftermath of a near-death situation, it is not clear why many people do not report an NDE that has occurred, why others report pleasant NDEs, and why a much smaller number of people report distressing NDEs.

Immediate reactions to NDEs range from “no big deal” to intense preoccupation. Long-term effects of NDEs typically involve mild to extreme changes in personal beliefs, attitudes, values, goals, and one’s sense of spirituality.

Caregiver attitude makes a difference.

The most helpful caregiver fosters a safe psychological environment. In this setting, the NDER can express and explore the NDE itself and his or her evolving

response to it. The caregiver creates this environment through an attitude of:

- ✧ Openness to listening to as little or as much as the NDER wants to disclose.
- ✧ Acceptance of the NDER’s experience as his or her subjective reality.
- ✧ Interest in the NDE as a valid human experience.
- ✧ Inquiry into any meaning that the NDER attributes to the experience.
- ✧ Support for the NDER’s ongoing process of integration.

Establishing and maintaining this attitude often calls for the caregiver to put aside personal beliefs and values in order to honor and foster the NDER’s development of his or her own beliefs and values.

Helpful Skills for Caregivers

Prior to any situation in which an NDE might possibly occur, such as a medical procedure, the caregiver volunteers this reassurance: “At any time before or after your procedure, I’m interested to know anything you’re experiencing. Feel free to tell me anything.”

After any situation in which an NDE might have occurred, the caregiver volunteers this information: “Sometimes when people have been through (the particular situation), they describe unusual—sometimes even weird—memories or experiences. I wonder whether you have a memory or an experience like that?” If the person looks quizzical or uncertain, the caregiver reflects, “It looks like you don’t have any memory of anything unusual,” and then moves on to a topic of relevance to the person. If the person responds with any level of recognition, the caregiver reflects, “I’m interested to hear about anything you want to tell me from what you remember.” If the person reports an unusual memory or experience, whether or not it seems to

be an NDE, the caregiver uses these two primary skills:

Reflection: restating the emotions and content the person is describing (“So you found yourself in a beautiful, intensely colored sort-of garden scene where things seemed to be lit up from the inside?”), and

Open-ended questioning: questions that cannot be answered by “yes” or “no” which encourage the person to go into more detail (“And what happened next?”).

When the person has described the actual experience as much as they wish, the caregiver asks, “What does the experience

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mean to you?” or “What do you make of all that?” and reflects the answer back to the person. The caregiver evaluates the person’s level of need for further help:

If the person seems satisfied to have discussed his or her experience to this extent, the caregiver offers, “If you would like to talk more about this again, or if you’d like information about others who’ve had experiences similar to yours, let me know.”

If the person wants more information, the caregiver refers them to the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) website iands.org. This site contains information on NDEs and details of support groups, which usually meet on a monthly basis.

If the person seems distressed, preoccupied, or otherwise emotionally upset, the caregiver should refer the person to a mental health professional who is equipped to provide more intensive and ongoing assistance. In Canada, caregivers can contact, or can refer the NDEr to the Spiritual Emergence Service (spiritualemergence.net or 604-687-4655). 

This information is an edited reprint, courtesy of iands.org.

Resources

For suggestions about appropriate mental health interventions, readers may consult these resources:

- ✧ Greyson, B. (1996) “The near-death experience as transpersonal crisis,” pp. 302–315, in Scotton, B.W., A. Chinen & J.R. Barrista (eds.) *Textbook of Transpersonal Psychiatry and Psychology*. New York: Basic Books.
- ✧ Greyson, B. (1997) “The near-death experience as a focus of clinical attention.” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 185, pp. 327–334.
- ✧ Greyson, B. & B. Harris. (1987) “Clinical approaches to the near-death experience.” *Anabiosis* 6, pp. 41–52.

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How FACEBOOK AND OTHER INTERNET

BY JAWEED KALEEM

Sometime in mid-July, Anthony Dowdell put on his favorite plaid shirt, drove his Dodge pickup to the parking lot of a Sam's Club in Linden, NJ, leaned back in the driver's seat, and shot himself.

Nobody knows exactly when the 39-year-old, who went by the online moniker "Dare Dellcan," took his life. Nobody knows why the normally cheery creative director and design company owner did it. And for the first couple of days, few people besides the police officers who found his body on July 16 knew he was dead.

The day after the discovery, a message appeared on Dowdell's Facebook wall:

"I am a friend of Anthony's. I wish I could call you all to inform you personally, and this is probably a crappy way to find this out, but our dear friend Anthony aka Ant aka Dare Dellcan has passed away. It is confirmed. I live around the corner and I have spoken with authorities this evening ... I am only sharing this because if I was Anthony's friend, I would want to know too. And I know that Anthony had friends all over the place."

Dowdell had 692 friends in his social network. They were in New Jersey, where he lived, New York City, where he was raised, and spread across the States from Los Angeles to Miami. A few were in Brazil and Italy. As with most people on Facebook, they were former girlfriends and dates-turned-friends, high school and college classmates, coworkers. Many hadn't seen him in years. Most didn't know each other.

The message on Facebook, linked to a newspaper article about an unnamed man found dead in a truck in a Sam's parking lot, is how nearly all learned of Dowdell's death.

Dowdell wasn't close to his mother and stepfather, and "we knew from his family situation that there would not be any sort of memorial," says Jessa Moore, a 35-year-old friend who lives in Jersey City, NJ. "Facebook became our memorial. We could leave messages for him and each

other." Moore has been posting memories of Dowdell on his page for four months. Friends upload photos of him and his dog, Bacon; if they are at a restaurant or bar he would like, they "tag" his name so his Facebook profile shows that he, too, was there.

For some, it's been a painful experience to see constant reminders of Dowdell online, as if he were still living. Others have wondered if they're being respectful of his privacy. But for Moore, it's been cathartic. "For a month, I was there on his page every day. It just sort of kept us all connected," she says.

It used to be that news of death spread through phone calls, and before that, letters and house calls. The departed were publicly remembered via memorials on street corners, newspaper obituaries, and flowers at grave sites. To some degree, this is still the case. But increasingly, the announcements and subsequent mourning occur on social media. Facebook, with one billion detailed, self-submitted user profiles, was created to connect the living. But it has become the world's largest site of memorials for the dead.

Since the beginning of the Web, it's been plausible that pieces of information about people with websites and email accounts would be left accessible after they died. But the virtual cemetery is fairly new. One of the oldest online memorials is the UK-based Virtual Memorial Garden that began in 1995. A simple, alphabetized collection of tens of thousands of paragraph-long, user-submitted memories of the dead, it's still growing. Since social media first gained mass appeal a decade ago with Friendster (2002) and MySpace (2003), online profiles have outlived their creators. But the skyrocketing growth of Facebook has created a new terrain for death on the Internet.

VIRTUAL MEMORIALS

Dowdell is just one of an estimated 30 million people whose Facebook profiles have outlived them. By the end of this year, three million Facebook users' pages

will have become memorial sites for their owners, according to calculations by Nate Lustig, the founder of Entrustet, an online company that helps people access and delete online accounts after someone dies. Lustig arrived at the number by culling data on the total number of Facebook users, their ages and geographic distribution, and international death rates.

There are clear rules for how next of kin can inherit or delete accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the countless other online manifestations of ourselves that have proliferated. Usually, family members have to submit an obituary, news article, or death certificate to verify the user is dead. But unless there's a request, the rules on death are rarely enforced on social networks. Facebook allows only the living user of a registered account to have access to it—families can't get full access to profiles unless there is documented instruction from the deceased. In a rare case in June this year, a Wisconsin couple obtained a court order instructing Facebook to give them access to the personal messages in their 23-year-old son's account after he committed suicide.

It's easy to track who joins a social network, but it's hard to keep up with who dies. Some accounts exist in perpetuity. Others are shut down by friends or family who have access to passwords or can prove their relationship to the dead, or by social media companies due to inactivity. Facebook is largely hands-off with deceased users unless there are specific requests from families.

One unique site, MyDeathSpace.com, tracks social media profiles of the dead and maintains an extensive message board and Facebook page, where the morbidly curious can discuss the passings. The site, with archives of 17,825 profiles of the dead, gets up to 11,000 views per day.

"Looking at the MySpace and Facebook profiles of the deceased that haven't been altered by family members is like looking at a snapshot of a person's life the moment

SITES ALLOW THE DEAD TO LIVE ON

before they passed away,” says Michael Patterson, the 31-year-old San Francisco resident who founded the site seven years ago. “You can see what the person was into, what music they enjoyed, and so many interesting things that were important before their passing.”

Other services, such as Lustig’s Entrustet, have been formed to assist the living in planning for their digital legacies. One—My Wonderful Life—not only offers digital estate planning, but schedules posthumous emails to be delivered to friends, coworkers, and loved ones.

The Web is profoundly changing the life of someone’s memory after their death.

“There aren’t really any norms around death and social media yet. People are kind of making it up as they go along,” says Jed Brubaker, a leading scholar in the relatively new field of digital identity and a doctoral candidate in informatics at the University of California-Irvine. “But what’s known is that this Facebook generation will have more experiences with death than any generation before it. Because anyone you ever knew, people who have naturally faded from your life, will remain there and you will stumble into them and realize they are dead.”

That’s what happened with Dowdell. Moore, a communications student and actress, had met him six months before

July 16. They first contacted each other on OkCupid, a dating website. There were no romantic sparks, but they became friends.

“We texted or talked or Facebooked every day. ...He was supposed to come over for dinner that week,” Moore says. But Dowdell’s Facebook page, peppered with photos of him with dogs, pictures of his design projects, and videos of him dancing, had been quieter than usual.

Moore didn’t come across the post about what had happened until a few days later. A friend posted a message on his Facebook wall after speaking to Dowdell’s mother, with whom Dowdell had a strained relationship. He would be



cremated with no ceremony. So Moore and a handful of Dowdell's friends began exchanging messages, planning for a celebration to keep his memory alive.

They posted photos of him prior to the gathering: a dapper Dowdell at a friend's wedding, him with a good friend's dog, him wearing a blue baseball cap as he posed with a friend, one that captured his fun-loving spirit: him sticking his tongue out in a grainy iPhone photo. On July 26, Dowdell was posthumously tagged at his own wake at Stout, a bar in Manhattan. "A gathering of the FAB ladies in honor of our dear friend Anthony (Dare). RIP, we love and miss you," the friends wrote.

The page has been filled with similar updates since. Most times, the friends speak directly to Dowdell, as if writing on a Facebook wall will transmit a message to him.

"It's more for us than for him," says Moore, whose name is scattered throughout the page with her own postings and "likes" of others' words. She says she doesn't think Dowdell would mind. He loved being online. It's how he met new friends and kept in touch with old ones. "I remember saying to him once, 'You know, everything on Facebook stays on Facebook. It's not going to go away or disappear.' That's how he felt," says Moore.

Some would rather that not be the case.

No CHECKBOX FOR DEATH

In early August, Rohan Aurora, a 24-year-old biomedical engineering student and technology blogger who attends the University of Southern California, was on Facebook, reading news about friends back home in New Delhi, India. The routine is common and deeply important for Aurora. He posts photos and updates of his life—announcements of internships and photos of mountain-climbing adventures—and friends comment on them, while he does the same for them.

One friend from high school, Lalit Mendhe, had a photo posted on his Facebook page of himself in a hospital bed. He didn't look so bad, Aurora thought. "It didn't seem like he was very uncomfortable." So he made a quip on his wall, hoping to cheer up a friend stuck in the hospital, whatever the cause may have been.

"He had a habit of keeping long hair, so I wrote under the photo, 'Did you get a haircut?'" said Aurora. Not long after, he

got a message in his inbox from another one of Mendhe's friends. Mendhe, 23, had been in a car crash. He died of cardiac arrest and liver failure in that hospital bed.



Aurora immediately deleted his comment. They hadn't been very close, but would meet whenever Aurora was back in India. Facebook had allowed their bond to survive. It's been four months, and while Aurora misses his friend, he doesn't want to think about his death all the time. He says Facebook is forcing him to.

"My roommates and I, we have a lot of mutual friends on Facebook. And it would keep on notifying them that they may 'know' Lalit and should add him on Facebook," says Aurora. "My friends would pull me over and say, 'Do you know him?' He's expired. It just doesn't look nice."

One of Facebook's most loved and loathed elements is the "people you may know" feature. Based upon your location, university, or workplace and the people one has already friended, Facebook employs a formula to suggest users befriend people they "may know," usually friends of friends. Above a link to "add friend," Facebook shows the name and thumbnail photo of the suggested individual.

"One of my good pictures with Lalit, it came up on Facebook and it asked me to tag and identify this person. It's not good. You are tagging him at the wrong time. When I go through my pictures, I see his comment. I am forced to click on his name and look back," says Aurora.

"A Facebook profile is an indication that someone is alive. We need to respect one's privacy."

What to do with dead profiles is an increasing problem for Facebook. Three years ago, the company introduced a feature to convert profiles of dead friends into official memorial pages to avoid the kinds of issues Aurora has seen.

"We believe we have put in effective policies that address the accounts that are left behind by the deceased," said Fred Wolens, a Facebook spokesman. "When we receive a report that a person on Facebook is deceased, we put the account in a special memorialized state. Certain more sensitive information is removed, and privacy is restricted to friends only. The profile and wall are left up so friends and loved ones can make posts in remembrance. If we're contacted by a close family member with a request to remove the profile entirely, we will honor that request."

Memorials can be found only by people who were already friends with the dead person (by default, Facebook accounts show up in Google) and the "tag a friend" and "people you may know" features are disabled. But the memorialization option is unknown to even the most social media-savvy and hard to find on the site. It's unclear how much the feature is being used. Wolens said there are no figures on how many formally memorialized pages exist.

"Facebook doesn't do a good job of thinking about death," says Brubaker, the scholar who studies death on social media. "It doesn't have that concept. There's no checkbox that says 'I am dead,' and when would you click it anyway? What does it mean for all these profiles to be lingering on of people who are dead?"

Evan Carroll, who cofounded a website called The Digital Beyond, is trying to fill that gap. Along with cofounder John Romano, a coworker in the marketing business in Raleigh, NC, the site has dozens of articles on how to plan for digital assets after death, from email to bank accounts and, of course, Facebook. The site lists more than thirty for-profit online services for digital legacy management.

"People really want to control what they leave behind—and what's left behind of their loved ones," says Carroll. "But I think we are starting to see this shift in our feelings about death, where it will be

less tangible but will be about situations where we can remember people whenever, wherever we want to and make them part of our everyday lives.”

Aurora, who says he “wouldn’t write on Lalit’s wall” to say anything to his friend because he thinks he would violate Mendhe’s privacy after his death, tried to submit his friend’s page to become an official memorial, but Facebook asked him for a news article to confirm the death. “I said if you come to his wall, you will see the RIP message.” He forwarded the memorialization link to Mendhe’s brother in case he had better luck.

CONTINUING BONDS

For decades, the “five stages of grief,” a model introduced by Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in 1969, dominated popular thought about experiencing death. The stages—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—suppose that people will eventually get over the death of a loved one. Some of that thinking continues today with the shift of grieving to social media.

In part, it explains why people such as Aurora—who undoubtedly felt pain at his friend’s death but was not in his closest circles—would be ready for the profile of a dead person to stop showing up so often on Facebook. Aurora says his grieving process is done.

But it wouldn’t explain why someone like Moore would be grateful to see her friend’s Facebook account live in perpetuity. She would never ask for it to be removed, delete her words on his page or ask for a slimmed-down version of it to become a memorial. The stages of grief wouldn’t explain why one would hold on to the account of a dead person, writing messages on it and checking for updates as if that person had never gone away. Or is Facebook a new form of denial?

“Historically, clinicians may have looked at a Facebook wall and seen these people who are writing to the deceased as having not gotten over their attachment to the dead. They would say that by not letting go of that person they are not accepting the loss,” says Brubaker. “But more recently, there’s been this idea of ‘continuing bonds’ that takes strong issue with the notion that one has to ‘get over’ your relationship with the deceased. We always have relationships with the dead that continue. It’s just that the nature of those relationships changes.”

Maki Podell is caught somewhere in the middle of these two ways of looking at death and grieving. Two years ago, her husband Buff Herr went to his physician for a routine checkup and abruptly died on the exam table. Culturally observant of Jewish traditions, the family didn’t do an autopsy, so Podell and their daughter don’t know how Herr, who was 63, died. Podell, who lives in New York, buried him in Connecticut near her parents’ graves. She rarely visits. But as a Facebook novice—she had only recently joined—she was “both shocked and interested” to see her husband’s much more active Facebook page evolve into a tribute to his life. She was also taken aback by how people used the site to speak to her about his death.



“I had a friend send me condolences over Facebook. I thought, ‘Wow, buy a card,’” says Podell, a 61-year-old corporate sales agent for Balthazar, a New York-based restaurant and bakery. “I don’t think she meant any harm by it. It’s just very impersonal.”

“Some people didn’t realize he had died, so every May 4, they would leave ‘happy birthday’ messages. I would send them his obit notice,” says Podell, who was with Herr for 34 years. “I don’t know how real [Facebook] is. How much do you know about a person? Ultimately, it can be silly because you don’t.”

She looks at his Facebook wall about once a month. She reads through the messages friends leave for him—and still notifies the occasional visitor who thinks he’s alive. But she keeps her deepest thoughts about him private.

“I see people whose husbands are ill and the wives are playing out the whole scenario online. I just think you can overshare things sometimes. People’s lives, maybe their deaths, shouldn’t play out like that,” Podell says. “But on the other hand, I think, who will be remembered? A couple of presidents. Some poets. And who will remember you? Kids if you are just a normal schmoe. And if you’re lucky enough to see them, grandchildren. But that’s it.”

Podell says she has “a million memories” of her husband around her apartment. She can see his photos and his old letters anytime. Their daughter is 24, and they reminisce over the good times: Herr’s obsession with red wine (he ran a wine blog), his 80-person Thanksgiving parties, and his painstakingly cultivated backyard garden. But Podell finds herself going back to Facebook.

She looks over Herr’s old Facebook photos, like the black-and-white one of him dipping his daughter on the dance floor, and the one of him smiling, running his fingers through his hair while driving on a racetrack, one of his favorite hobbies. Known for his spontaneity, he once took her hand and serenaded her as they danced along a street during a visit to Los Angeles. A friend had snapped a photo and Podell recently made that her Facebook profile picture.

When she dies, she’s not sure if she wants the same kind of activity on her own Facebook. As much as it irks her to see some people pretend to know her husband when they didn’t, remembrances posted by others have touched her heart.

“Maybe it’s a way of pretending he is there on some level. It’s weird, I don’t even know what my own motives are,” she said. “My father died when I was 17. The way we kept him alive was talking about him all the time. But there comes a point when that stops, and I think that it doesn’t stop on Facebook. It just keeps going.”

This article originally appeared in the Huffington Post as “Death on Facebook Now Common as Dead Profiles Create Vast Virtual Cemetery” by Jaweed Kaleem. Contact Kaleem with death-related stories and ideas at jaweed.kaleem@huffingtonpost.com.

Aya Despacho: A Prayer Package for the Dead

by Kitty Edwards

After death our physical body returns to the earth.

Our wisdom returns to the mountains.

Our soul returns to the stars.

I first met Don Francisco Chura Flores, a Q'ero shaman, when I attended a class on shamanic energy medicine in the desert of Joshua Tree, CA. He dressed in the colorful hand-woven clothing of his people who live in the high mountains of Peru. He was not a tall man, but his presence was substantial. He had traveled to the desert as a guest of The Four Winds Society to give us, the students, the healer's rites of the Q'ero lineage of medicine men and women.

At the time, I was grieving the death of my aunt and godmother, who had died on the day I arrived in Joshua Tree. At her request, my cousins in Alabama had not told me of her impending death. She had successfully fought off breast cancer for many years, but at age 86, the cancer returned. She wanted only her daughters to attend her in her final days. I was shocked at the news of her death and further saddened that I could not travel quickly enough to get to her funeral. My southern upbringing triggered both guilt and grief because of my inability to participate.

Prodded by one of my teachers, who knew how unsettled I was, I put my name into the lottery for a private session with Don Francisco. My name was chosen and I was assigned a meeting time. Coincidentally, my session was scheduled at the same time as my aunt's funeral. Don Francisco and I sat facing each other on the floor in a small room. All around him were baskets of candies, chocolates, leaves, colorful yarns, beans, corn, quinoa, and fresh flowers. He asked me to blow on three leaves that he held in his hands. He then blew on the same leaves and laid them on a square sheet of paper that was positioned on the floor between us.

Over the next hour he created a beautiful despacho filled with my prayers and wishes. In the process, we celebrated the abundance and beauty of Pachamama (Mother Earth) and the journey we take through life. At some point in this ceremony, my grief shifted to a celebration of my relationship with my aunt and our love for each other. I was amazed how quickly this ritual brought me comfort, even though Don Francisco spoke no English and I spoke no Quechua.

A despacho is a prayer bundle or offering to the mountains, the earth, and our guiding spirits. There are many types of despacho ceremonies, each unique in form and intention. The Q'ero shamans

perform despacho ceremonies to help individuals face the significant events in their lives. During a despacho ceremony, participants place symbolic objects into the despacho to voice their intentions and requests.

An Aya (death) Despacho is created to assist the deceased in their journey into the afterlife. Through ceremony, participants create a rainbow bridge to ease the process of crossing over. According to the Q'ero shamans, after death our physical body returns to the earth. Our wisdom returns to the mountains. Our soul returns to the stars. The Aya Despacho is also a celebration of life, bringing closure to a life just lived. It is a participatory ceremony in which family and friends of the deceased reminisce, laugh, cry, and celebrate.

Since that time I spent with Don Francisco, I have learned to create Aya Despacho for others, helping grieving family members and beloved friends step into ceremony to lift the heaviness in their hearts. Even though this tradition has roots in a specific ancient cosmology, it is alive with meaning for our modern world.

During an Aya Despacho ceremony, participants sense the wisdom of this indigenous tradition rooted in archetypal energies. As they use their breath to express their hopes and wishes and place symbolic objects into the layers of the Aya Despacho, a rainbow bridge is created. The first two layers represent the lower world, which embodies the spirit of the earth and her ancient feminine powers. The next two layers represent the middle world, the world in which we live and the life of the person who has died. The last three layers represent the upper world, the world of our becoming. The structure of an Aya Despacho ceremony is traditional. However, the intention is to step beyond structure, beyond time, and into the unseen world of the spirits and the ancestors.

The power of these concepts was brought home to me when I traveled through



the Andes. I found myself awestruck by the immediacy of the symbols of this cosmology. The mountains that soar 20,000 feet above the sea are simultaneously dominant and protective. I felt the influence of the mountains surrounding the Sacred Valley, the ancient capital of the Inca Empire. Once, while floating across Lake Titicaca at night, the Milky Way appeared as an illuminated pathway to a timeless domain. I knew then that this was truly the path of the ancestors.

Below you will find abbreviated instructions for performing an Aya Despacho ceremony, which creates a prayer bundle of many layers.

Aya Despacho Ceremony

It is important to begin any ceremony by opening sacred space. When open, sacred space creates an envelope in the shape of an octahedron (eight-sided, six-pointed) around the ceremony. The most common way to do this is to call on the cardinal directions: south, west, north, and east. With each direction, invite in natural elements that represent that direction. Examples might be: summer, fall, winter, and spring; mountain, desert, ocean, and jungle; or animals, such as serpent, jaguar, hummingbird, and eagle. Next, invite the earth below you and the sky above you to complete the octahedron. Within this container, everyone is protected and anything is possible. Make an offering to the earth by splashing red wine on the ground. Then, toss white wine into the air as an offering to the heavens.

Black Layer

Fold a large sheet of black paper into thirds one way, and then in thirds the other way. This will create nine squares on the paper. The despacho is built on the center square. The black layer represents the dark world of the unconscious and unknown. Each element added to this layer acknowledges the mystery. Place sugar in each of the four corners of the center square.



For this black layer, each participant creates two k'intus. Each k'intu is made up of three dried leaves. Place the three leaves on top of each other. Add one red carnation petal and one white carnation petal on top of the leaves. Blow your prayers and wishes into the k'intu. The breath is very important. It is the active prayer of engaging the sacred. Pass the k'intu to the person on your left, who will add their prayers and wishes to yours.

The purpose of the first k'intu is to honor any unfinished business between yourself and the deceased. The purpose of the second k'intu is to honor any unfulfilled dreams. Once all the k'intus have been passed, place them in a circle in the center of the despacho. Sprinkle seeds over the despacho to grow the prayers.

To fuel the release of any dreams, place fat on this layer. Put a red bean and a black bean into the despacho to balance masculine and feminine energies.

Red Layer

Cover the previous layer with a sheet of red tissue paper, cut slightly smaller than the outer black paper. The items added to this layer are in gratitude to the earth. The tradition is to feed the earth with chocolates, candies, herbs, and incense. Place a photograph of the person who has died on this layer.

Green Layer

Cover the previous layer with a sheet of green tissue paper. Everything we add to this layer is in gratitude for the abundance in our world. Animal cookies,



Photographs all by Candace Brad

quinoa, paper money, tools, corn, and fat are added to this layer. Participants can personalize the offerings by telling stories about the deceased, his pets, work, and favorite foods. Raisins are added to this layer to represent the wisdom of our ancestors that lives on in us today.

Blue Layer

Cover the previous layer with a sheet of blue tissue paper. This layer represents the sacred mountains. Everything we add to this layer is white. Sugar, cotton balls for clouds, rice, salt, candles, flowers, and wine are offered symbolically. The final addition to this layer is a white feather for flight.

Purple Layer

Cover the previous layer with a sheet of purple tissue paper. This layer represents the many colors of the rainbow bridge. Everything we add to this layer is in gratitude to the journey. Place a shell at the center of the despacho. Place into the shell a symbolic human figure of the opposite sex from the deceased. This is the cosmic twin that connects with the departed. Next, add multi-colored yarn in the shape of a rainbow. Colorful flowers, confetti, and incense are also added. The final addition to this layer is a white ribbon placed in a circle to represent the cycle of life.

Gold Layer

Cover the previous layer with a sheet of gold tissue paper. This layer represents vision and alignment with destiny. Everything we add to this layer is in gratitude to the stars. Participants create two more k'intus for this layer. These k'intus encourage participants to surrender to the unknown. On this layer all other ingredients are gold- or silver-colored. Incense, stars, flutes, a sea star, and a seed pod are added.

White Layer

Cover the previous layer with a sheet of white tissue paper. This is the layer of oneness and nothingness. It covers all the other layers. Nothing else is added.

Once the rainbow layers have been assembled and all items added, fold the outer black paper over the contents of the despacho. Tie the despacho with gold and silver cords. Wrap the cords carefully around the despacho without flipping it over, so that the prayers inside are not disturbed. Close the sacred space. Thank and release each of the energies that were called in to create the sacred space.

Fire Ceremony to Burn an Aya Despacho

An Aya Despacho should be burned in a ceremonial fire as soon as possible. Fire provides rapid transmission of the prayers and wishes.

To build the fire, first place two sticks of kindling in the form of the Southern Cross, a star constellation in the southern hemisphere. Build a teepee of wood above the cross. Participants stand closely in a circle around the fire. Open a sacred space by calling in the cardinal directions, the earth, and heavens. Light the fire. One person should act as the caretaker for the fire during the ceremony, adding wood as needed.

Sing a chant or a familiar song that has simple, repetitive words. Choose a song that is appropriate for the traditions or beliefs of the participants. Place the despacho in the fire when the fire is hot. With politeness, turn your backs to the fire and stand in silence while the despacho burns. It is considered rude to watch the spirits consume a despacho.

When fire keeper indicates that the despacho is completely burned, close the sacred space in gratitude. At least two people should stay with the fire until the embers are cold. Do not put water on the fire. Ashes created in this sacred fire should be buried in the earth at a later time.

An Aya Despacho and fire ceremony are performed to assist the dead in the process of stepping out of their physical body. The Q'ero shamans say that the spirit of the dead lingers in the vicinity for





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Two Realms: The Teachings of the Q'ero Shamans

In the high mountains of Peru, the Q'ero people lived in isolation for hundreds of years, escaping the destruction of their culture by the conquistadors. The Q'ero shamans, who preserve the ancient spiritual and healing traditions, are the descendants of the Incas. In the 1950s, because a prophecy directed them, the Q'ero shamans descended from the mountains and engaged with the people below to assist in the transformation that would occur in 2012 and beyond. They brought their cosmology and ceremonies to the valleys of Peru and the rest of the world.

seven days before moving on to the upper world. In the first two weeks following an Aya Despacho ceremony there are instances of opportunity for healing to take place for the one who has crossed over and the ones left behind. During this time, it is possible for relationships to shift and new connections to be made. 🌐

Kitty Edwards teaches "Dying Consciously, the Greatest Journey." She is a graduate of the Healing the Light Body School of The Four Winds Society and has studied with shamans in North and South America and Southeast Asia. For a more complete description of an Aya Despacho, visit www.dyingconsciouslyboulder.com.

Like other indigenous peoples, the Q'ero believe that there are two realms of existence. First, there is the ordinary realm, the world we can see, touch, taste, and smell. In addition, there is a non-ordinary realm, which exists outside of time, and where guardian spirits and the ancestors reside. According to the Q'ero, this non-ordinary realm informs everything in the universe. The purpose of any despacho ceremony is to provide a means of communication between the ordinary and non-ordinary realms.

Similar to many religious mythologies, the Q'ero also believe in the existence of three levels of experience: the lower world, the middle world, and the upper world. The lower world is a dark and mysterious place; this is the domain of our subconscious and our shadow. The middle world is where we reside, work, play, and love, discovering all that is possible in our physical bodies. We travel to the upper world after death. It holds our destinies. The non-ordinary realm in each of these worlds is mapped by shamans, who journey between these worlds in service to their communities.



Healing the Past before We Die

by Christine Hart, MD

A medical doctor trained in allopathic, Western medicine, I nevertheless believe that our past lives affect our health and well being in this life. Unresolved trauma, outdated beliefs, and conflict from previous incarnations remain in our soul energy fields. Working with past life traumas can present powerful opportunities for deep healing. Phobias, inexplicable medical problems, and unusual personality traits may originate from unresolved incidents from our prior lives. So in my current practice I incorporate energy work to address the spiritual core of illness.

Ten years ago I seldom thought about reincarnation; when I did, I discounted it as a fantastical belief. However, after reading Dr. Brian Weiss' accounts of patients who have been cured of psychiatric issues with past life work, I began to open to the concept of a consciousness that continues after physical death and transfers into our new lives and experiences.

I was born with intuitive gifts. I had no mentors to teach me to use them until I met Alberto Villoldo, who teaches shamanic practices of the Peruvian Q'ero. Over the course of two years, I learned to work with the "luminous

energy field" that is our eternal light body. Villoldo taught me to track and heal past life trauma. I was amazed that this process could heal medical and psychological problems that confounded me as a medical doctor. I realized that while my medical knowledge provided me an excellent foundation for working with symptoms of illness, it was this soul work—including past life work—that addressed the source of illness.

The more I have looked, the more I have found to substantiate the idea of reincarnation. Recently I've been investigating documented stories of children who recall past lives. One of the most well known is of two-year-old James Leininger who remembered his life as WWII pilot James Huston, who was killed in the battle for Iwo Jima. James recalled the name of his plane, the name of the aircraft carrier, and the names and faces of his fellow marines. His father and mother, conservative Christians who discounted reincarnation as nonsense, worked hard to overcome their skepticism and understand their son's unsettling memories and documented all of the facts his son presented. When James attended a reunion of the marines who'd fought in WWII, he knew the names of the veterans who had flown with him in the war. After

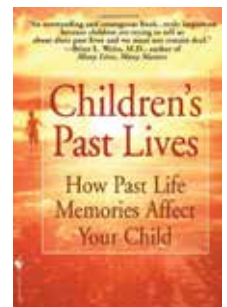
the reunion, James told his parents, "I'm sorry everyone is so old." The fascinating story of James Leininger appears in a



book by his father, Bruce: *Soul Survivor: The Reincarnation of a World War II Fighter Pilot*. James is also featured in a YouTube video.

Dr. Ian Stevenson has recorded thousands of cases of young children who recalled past lives. He has researched several hundred of them and was able to prove that the accounts offered by these children were true.

Stevenson's book, *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect*, contains fascinating accounts from the hundreds of children and families he interviewed. Carol Bowman is another researcher who has dedicated her life to working with children with past life recall. Her book, *Children's Past Lives*, helps parents assist their young children to understand and integrate memories.



When I intuit that past life trauma is responsible for unpleasant symptoms in a present life, I use energy work to heal the dis-ease. Julie, a middle-aged woman I worked with, had suffered migraines for years. She had been evaluated and treated by the usual medical modalities. Our work together focused on Julie's life as a soldier who had died when a bullet pierced his helmet. At the conclusion of our sessions, her migraines had vanished. Another woman client, Elaine, was plagued by bothersome twisting movements in her neck. These disturbing symptoms had



Wynne Bruce

Again

not responded to an array of different therapies. We discovered that Elaine had been an executioner who had been forced to perform his duties against his wishes; the executioner had always used his right arm for executions. During our session together, Elaine was able to release the hatchet man's guilt, along with the associated negative energies that were stuck in the right arm and shoulder. Over the next month, the neck twisting disappeared.

On another occasion, a male client, Peter, came to me with a similar physical ailment that would not respond to conventional treatment. Peter had such severe back pain that he was unable to stand upright. His considerable injuries prevented him from leading an active life. He was unhappily relegated to the position of store clerk, a job that he considered beneath him. It became clear that he had jumped off a train in a past life because he did not have a ticket. When we uncovered this past discontent and worked to address it energetically, Peter's pain dissipated. A year after our session it had still not returned.

Sometimes clients enter my office out of curiosity. They want to know about my shamanic energy work, but they haven't come because something needs fixing. Such was the case with Matthew, who was bothered by a pain in his side that had resisted diagnosis. "I came to see Christine out of curiosity about energy work—not about 'the thing in my side.' I had previously been checked by my own physician for this issue. I'd had a colonoscopy and an MRI. No problem had been identified. Christine tracked and removed an energy that she characterized as a past life wound from a large tree branch. The branch had probably caused a fatal injury. Of course, its exit/entrance point was exactly at the place of my side pain (of which, at that point, she knew nothing). After the past life work with Christine, my side no longer bothered me."



Wynn Bruce

These encounters with clients have taught me that consciousness continues after we die, and that unresolved issues carry over into subsequent lives. But we can heal the traumas and dis-eases that plague us physically and emotionally in our current incarnations.

My teachers tell me that work on healing is much easier before we die than after we leave our bodies. It takes time and courage to address this much-needed soul work, but it is so important for our health, in all senses of the word. 🌱

Christine Hart has been offering her energy work for seven years. She greatly values the support of her spiritual community. Her favorite pastimes include hiking, cycling, plinking the banjo, and participating in the Universal Dances of Peace. Contact Christine at christinehart123@gmail.com.

Soul Passage Midwifery

by Patricia L'Dara

When her mother was dying, Patricia L'Dara, teacher, choreographer, and sound healer, discovered her ability to see across the threshold. She has since walked many souls to the other side. The following is an edited excerpt from her upcoming book, *Song of Sight*.

First Song of Sight

Both my parents are hospitalized simultaneously, Dad with a stroke and Mom with leukemia. When I visit Mom, I see flowers have arrived. This beautiful bouquet of red roses is a treasured gift from a life-long friend. The room brightens considerably. I have to run an errand and my car stalls. When I call the nursing home, I learn that my mother has taken a turn for the worse, and it is only a matter of time. I call the minister and he comes to bless her. My older brother Jim is present. Both the minister and my brother are gone by the time I arrive. Delicate flowers grace the window sill; they are stunning purple and white orchids, which a friend lovingly grew in his home.

The family gathers. Dear friends arrive. Everyone takes turns visiting both Mom and Dad. Hugs and tears are shared readily. Warm smiles bolster each of us. After a time I begin to feel my mother becoming very sensitive to noise and talking. She is ready for people to leave. As they depart and I realize that she will soon die, I break down sobbing. The nurses take me to another room where I cry my heart out. The ache seems like a chasm larger than the Grand Canyon.

When I return to Mom's room, I am speechless and utterly amazed with the profound radiance that is present. The orchids are pulsing majestically with their purple and white colors stretching all the way to the ceiling and over to Mom's bed like crystals reflecting the sunlight. Angels filled with vast love are surrounding her. The exquisite beauty emanating from my mother is astounding. Just a moment ago, all I could see was a ravaged woman struggling for breath. Now, she is brimming with youth and

vitality. The brilliance is palpable. What is this vibrant life before me? How can it be, I wonder, but have no time for contemplation. I quickly move to Mom's bedside and, without forethought, begin spontaneously singing. This brings closeness and security for both of us. Since she is in severe pain and cannot tolerate touch, singing is the thread that weaves us together. I sing of the joy we have shared, thank her for all she has done. I sing that she will go forward first, then help us when it is our time. I include songs and hymns that she loves in my singing as well. A dear friend joins me, and we continue singing together. As Mom's time draws near, I feel the intensity of the energy change dramatically, compelling us to sing more quickly with a gospel-like rhythm.

Suddenly, I am immersed in another reality I call the Greater World. I don't know how I get here, but I am walking in a dense fog with my mother in my arms. While I don't feel I know where we are going, it does feel like I have been here many times before. In fact, it feels more familiar than my regular earth life. My internal sonar guides the way with strength and certainty. At the bedside, I continue singing to my mom. Through my third eye, I watch as we walk in the Greater World. We come to a large, golden bridge and begin walking over it. My mother and I do not talk. We are immersed in the sacred silence that rings with purity and living intelligence. From the profound depths of this silence, splendid angelic music begins to surround, infuse, and embrace us. About midway across the bridge, the fog suddenly clears and the Christ appears in a white robe, radiating a gentle, peaceful, joyous welcome. No words can describe the vastness of the love that pours into us at this moment. As I pass my mother to the outstretched arms of the Christ, I am filled with celestial celebration. My mother is home. I am amazed and grateful. Also, I know she will be fine. What a comfort.

The Birth of Soul Passage Midwifery

Following the experience with my mother, I discovered that I could be present in expanded consciousness with anyone crossing the veil, either in person or long distance. Thus Soul Passage Midwifery was born. The soul's desire to make the journey is the singular requirement. If a being would like accompaniment, she or he will invite my presence. If not—regardless of the family's desires—there will be no contact.

I frequently work long distance with souls. It is not unusual for me to accompany a soul for a specific portion of his or her journey, either before or after the actual crossing. In this way, messages can be transmitted to loved-ones. Many souls have specific questions and once these are answered, they move on quickly.

A Soul Passage Midwife is in a unique position to experience many things related to a crossing. (In my experience, soul passage midwives can also escort souls to their new spiritual homes prior to death, like a dress rehearsal.) I often receive glimpses into the expanded awareness of the transitioning soul. These snapshots come as poems, songs, visions, and/or instruction.

The stories that follow are accounts of my experiences of witnessing souls cross over. They also contain messages and perspectives to help us see the death passage through different eyes. As the seeds of holiness within us begin to sprout, the walk to the other side becomes a joyful expression of purposeful intent. It is clear that we cannot "think" our way through the dying process. Open hearts are the basis for moving forward with clarity and purpose.

Gladys

Gladys and I connect through meditation while she is still alive. All of my time with her is in the Greater World. It is 1999.



IsisMari, Womb of Heaven
by Valerie Chelonis
2ft x 4ft, acrylics, interference and metallic
colors
www.spirithorsedesign.com

Saturday: I pray for Gladys and place heather in the prayer basket to help her connect with her soul. Although I can feel her presence, it is difficult and feels as if she is heavily sedated.

Sunday: I find Gladys encased in unworthiness, which is extremely thick and resembles the Great Wall of China, immovable and impenetrable. I wash her feet, brush her hair, and oil her body. I surround her in beauty by draping her in beautiful cloth, bring flowers to her, and light candles. I sing, and Gladys responds with a feeling of wonder and peaceful joy.

Monday: Gladys says she is afraid to go forward because God will be as punishing and mean as her abusive husband. I call in Divine Mother and Mary. I offer Tonglen, the Buddhist practice of breathing in another's pain and breathing out love.

Thursday: I see Gladys sitting quietly in a chair.

Wednesday, the following week: I see a still bell in an archway. At Midnight Gladys pops in to see me. She is smiling and walking with a walker. I invite her to sit and she does so in a pink chair. Suddenly, she jumps up with glee, arches back, feet doubled up behind her as in a dance. She sits back in the chair and we touch foreheads.

We both practice Tonglen for a friend because Gladys wants to learn the process. When I did the Tonglen for Gladys, she felt enormous relief. We both breathe in the friend's pain and breathe out love. The friend responds positively to our joint assistance. Gladys connects with her mother in the Greater World and is very excited to see her. On the physical plane, my four-year-old daughter cries. Gladys' soul stays with me to comfort her as she lovingly remembers her own children.

Wednesday evening, the following week: Gladys is still in physical form. She needs assistance. I offer the Melchizedek Prayer from ancient times. Gladys says she wants to enjoy the love of children before she moves on. I offer Tonglen, calling in Divine Mother from the sacred feminine, and chanting. The Wall of China then becomes a flower garden; a beautiful living, vibrant, breathing garden.

Thursday morning: I learn that Gladys passed the night prior. Gladys comes to know her greater self and thus resolves the dilemma of her inability to cross the threshold or to stay in this world.

Don

Don is aging and does not want to go through the humiliation of physically declining. He hangs himself. It is 2008.

When I meet Don in the Greater World, he is filled with such intense remorse that no one can get near him. He is like a severely wounded wild animal. My soul touches lightly to keep track of his minute progress, awaiting an opportunity to get closer. After about six hours, my soul is able to sit beside him. We say nothing. I sit for a seemingly long time, continuously sending deep love. Gently, I eventually begin talking with him. Many light beings surround us, holding us in eternal awareness. Finally, I am able to put my arm tenderly around him. We continue to sit quietly for a long while. When Don is able to stand, I escort him to the angelic presences that help provide care for this fractured being.

Gabrielle

Gabrielle has cancer and can no longer stay on the earth plane. But, she does not want to leave her children and experiences powerful thoughts of self-condemnation. These thoughts keep her from moving on, so she hovers in a suspended state. My time with Gabrielle is in the Greater World. It is 2010.

I spend a long time with Gabrielle in our third session. She sobs and sobs in my arms. I focus on "Holding the Presence" with Gabrielle in the holy temple. This is a practice that beloved Hindu saint Sri Paramahansa Yogananda shared with me as a container for the entire process of transitioning. I share Tonglen in which I breathe in Gabrielle's pain and breathe out love. It is very powerful. Kali, the Hindu goddess of purification, appears to purify destructive thoughts. Archangel Jophiel from the Christian tradition works to help Gabrielle see beauty in all its dimensions and forms. Other light beings bring gifts. I prepare to suggest the "Transference of Consciousness" as described by Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Soygal Rinpoche. Immediately, at this thought, the Christ appears to place the "ever abiding peace which passeth all understanding" into Gabrielle's heart. She takes it in deeply and begins connecting with hearts all over the world. When I leave, Gabrielle is resting peacefully in the holy temple, with many angelic beings watching over her. My soul will stay with her until she passes.

I receive an email later in December that Gabrielle has passed.

Jerry

Jerry is preparing for his passage. He is in a nursing facility. My time with him is in person and in the Greater World. When in person, Jerry is very aware and remembers everyone, but his body is giving out. His world is gently getting smaller. He shares time with family and friends and eats ice cream. The following snapshots are in the Greater World. It is 2011.

Wednesday morning: I enter meditation, and I am greeted by my soul, Jerry's soul, and the soul of his beloved dog, who preceded him in transitioning to the Greater World. Together, we shall escort Jerry to his new home. What a fabulous reunion. The dog is licking Jerry's face. Jerry's soul is laughing at the licking and at the hilarity of the cosmos. He is not ready to cross just yet, but he will be

soon. My soul is thrilled with this sudden turn of events and honored to walk with him in this way. The heavens are preparing and awaiting Jerry's welcome. My soul and the beloved dog stand in awareness 24/7. It is so very sweet.

Wednesday evening: My soul appears with an enormous feather in hand, and I wonder what she is planning. The scene moves quickly, and I see that it is a purification ceremony. The beloved dog, Jerry, and I are in a very quiet, peaceful setting. I light the sage and am sweeping the body with the feather. Jerry's soul is smiling. I voice the "Heart Chant" from Dhyani Ywahoo's book, *Voices of our Ancestors: Cherokee Teachings from the Wisdom Fire*. It is beautifully serene.

Thursday morning: Jerry's soul and mine visit his new home, so we know where he will be going. There is a little cabin with a front porch, huge rock outcroppings, and forest, similar to that of New Mexico. The beloved dog and Jerry walk and play. Five communities surround the cabin, holding space for a peaceful transition and wait to welcome Jerry and the dog. Ten communities surround the five, and twenty surround the ten. Jerry can travel anywhere he likes.

Elders from the five communities welcome Jerry. The community members stand in a circle about an acre in size, awaiting the welcoming ceremony. There is an opening in the circle for Jerry, the beloved dog, and me to step through to walk to the elders. Jerry knows many people from other lives in these communities, but he is not looking for them right now.

There is heart resonance with the beings in the communities. As Jerry's heart heals and expands, others feel this and immediately emerge to greet him. There is a peaceful flow to this process that allows for quiet reflection and loving community within the context of Jerry's personal rhythm.

Sunday: Jerry's physical mind is having a difficult time believing the Greater World exists. He is ensconced in disbelief, which makes his transition challenging. Jerry continues to state that he "believes in nothing" for as long as he is able to talk.

A chant begins to help Jerry understand the unseen world. In the Greater World, White Eagle from the Native American tradition plays a drum-beat to assist:

*One with the heart beat
One with the purrr
One with the breeze that blows through the
hair
One with the Great Song*

My soul inquires of Jerry: Can you hear the dog barking at your side? Can you see the tail wagging? Can you feel the lick to greet you? I then create two visual message cards, which read: "Ensnconed in Disbelief" with a big X over the words, next to a message card with the words "Flying Free." This is to encourage Jerry to choose the freedom of the Greater World over limitation.

Thursday: Jerry departs. I receive the following poem:

*Jerry of the freedom riders singing his song
Jerry in the Joy and Love all the day long
Vibrant hues and brilliant stars
Gazing out one sees so far
Such a conundrum this cosmos scheme
Just when one has the thread, it breaks in
between
The one holding and all that follows after
Such a feeling of despair and seeming disaster
The trick must be holding strong to the center
of the theme
That way one can come and go without
creating a seam
Rest is good, rest is fine
Oh my heart does feel sublime
Thank you for the wonderful signs.*

Corrine

Corrine's body has a tumor that has recently increased exponentially in size. She is a special friend, and I am saddened to hear this news. My time with her is in person and in the Greater World. It is 2012.

Summer: When we first meet in the Greater World, I am wondering if this is going to be her time, or if she is going to work through this health crisis. She asks me if I will speak at her memorial service. I am stunned, but of course say yes.

When we part, I don't know if she really wants me to do this or if it is her way of letting me know that it is soon time for her departure.

One month later: Corrine and I are sitting at a table in the Greater World. We are having tea and she is crying: crying for lost love, crying for leaving too soon, and all the while, wondering why she is having a difficult time because we have been through this many times together in different lives. Spiritual sisters always help each other when transitioning between worlds. We talk about what it is to be human and that the accompanying feelings are deep indeed. It is not easy to say goodbye to loved ones, even with the deep spiritual knowledge we share. We talk of the many times we have helped each other at this juncture and how it is always bittersweet.

My soul stands and walks over to a huge picture window in her room that is completely dark. I take two ends and flip the window over so that Corrine is peering out, looking now at eternity. The brilliance is stunning. She must no longer look at what is past, but must embrace her new life. With this, she smiles her beautiful smile and says she is ready to keep her conscious focus.

AUTUMN

Tuesday: I go with a friend to see Corrine and hang silks over her bed to indicate that her time to cross the threshold is at hand. Corrine looks beautiful and occasionally briefly opens her eyes. When we finish our task, a peaceful energy surrounds Corrine. There is an altar with flowers at the foot of her bed, which is also draped in soft, multi-colored silks. Reluctantly, I kiss her goodbye.

Thursday: Corrine's soul appears to me in a white dress. Our souls are standing together in the Greater World, preparing for her transition. We are surrounded by archangels. I recognize Archangel Azrael from the Christian tradition and I know Corrine's time is quite near.

Saturday: I meet with Corrine in the Greater World. I am "Holding the Presence" from Sri Yogananda to assist Corrine. Loved-ones surround her. We

move through the elemental kingdom with the fairies, gnomes, Gaia, to many angels all wishing her a beautiful walk. Corrine spends much time working with the male-female balance. This has been skewed towards a patriarchal perspective and needs to shift into a more harmonious alignment. Corrine has an important role, working energetically to shift the male-female templates, bringing in the loving sacred feminine. She has been carrying much energy to transmute for the collective unconscious of us all and this has been difficult for her physical body. Angels remind Corrine that there are no time constraints. She is the designer of this crossing. Quan Yin, from the Buddhist tradition, who represents compassion, and Kali from the Hindu tradition, help her embrace the new beginning. Butterfly Maiden, the Native American goddess of transformation, assures her that this is a birth and encourages her to enjoy the beautiful transformation.

Corrine turns to me and says she would like me to walk with her. She adds that she will take her time so she can take in every nuance of the profound awareness that occurs during a transition between worlds. Joyfully we walk arm in arm on a white carpet stretched laterally across the cosmos. Corrine greets each of the beings who line the sides of the carpet to welcome her. Celebration is in the air. There is much music and wild flowers are strewn before her.

After the long, stunning walk, we reach the end of the white path. Standing together to welcome Corrine, gently radiating a deeply precious love, are the Christ and Mari Magdalene. Corrine and I both gasp with amazement. We take in the profound realization that the work of many souls on both sides of the veil to restore the sacred feminine is in fact progressing. Corrine turns to me and gives me a very tender hug. On the earth plane I burst into tears. Corrine then goes with the Christ and Mari Magdalene in a swirl of light. I return here. Corrine's walk took three days in earth time.

From a greater perspective, a death passage is the ultimate trompe l'oeil, a painted artistic canvas that deceives our eyes. Visually, we perceive one thing, yet something altogether different is happening. In a death passage, a body once filled with vigor and purpose wanes day by day, leaving us filled with despair. Yet, our true essence, consciousness, and loving awareness strengthens daily, unnoticed because we have not developed the perceptual skills to recognize this change.



Soul Passage Midwifery mirrors the experience of the death passage in that it engages the soul in a process of releasing, deepening, and expanding. Like walking a labyrinth, our awareness moves deeply inward, then expands outward. On the inward journey, we release preconceived

notions and judgments about who we are, why we are here, and where we are going. We move into the core of our hearts to peer through a window that we thought was locked shut, but which opens readily to an amazing world. On the outward journey, we alter our perceptions of reality through expansion, so we can meet other worlds and welcome them into our own. As we gain more insights through Soul Passage Midwifery about the transitioning process and become more comfortable with our multi-dimensional selves, we will undoubtedly find our fluency in collaboration with the Great Song. 🌐

For more information about soul passage midwifery and Patricia L'Dara's upcoming book, Song of Sight: An Introduction to Soul Passage Midwifery, visit www.death-passage.com or email Patricia at soulpassagemidwifery@yahoo.com.

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An Activist's T-Shirt Shroud

by Lorelei Esser



Kathy Cantwell, pediatrician and environmental pioneer, was a forerunner for the conservation cemetery she helped to start. As a founding member of Conservation Burial Inc., she helped turn

North Florida's Prairie Creek Preserve near Gainesville into a conservation burial ground. When in 2010 she faced the prospect of death from cancer, her wish was for friends to lay her body to rest on the land she loved. Her body was the first interred at the site.

The following are edited excerpts from a diary kept by Kathy's friend, Lorelei, from the time immediately preceding her death until her passing and green, home funeral.

Saturday, July 17, 2010. We are preparing ourselves. We are making plans for the passing, the washing, the anointing, the handling, the transporting, the viewing, the wrapping, the laying on of hands....

The grave is being dug by men who love Kathy. They are honored as they remove each shovel of earth. She will be placed facing the sunrise. At her head will be a magnolia tree, a symbol of nature. It will grow, branch out, and rise up—a vision of her work of preserving the earth, loving it and its beautiful creatures—and serving youth with the gift of nature. We wait with her. She is surrounded by the light of our love.

As this is our first green burial, we have a number of unresolved issues to contend with. These include: dealing with death and transport certificates, body bag requirements, avoiding using a funeral home, and staying within laws that have not yet been approved in our county. Through it all, Freddie from Conservation Burial Inc., has guided us in his warm, loving, supportive, and helpful way.

Kathy died July 20, 2010 at 3:10am. We followed the newly devised green burial ritual. We tenderly bathed Kathy, patted her dry, and rubbed frankincense oil into her body. We put a fresh gown on her and put her in a leakproof bag for transport.

Meanwhile, we went ahead to prepare the room for her at her house. We removed all the medical devices, chairs, tables, pills, pads, and gloves, and created the next, and last, sacred space. When Kathy's body arrived, we laid her in the bed, in the brightest room in the house and lit candles.

We put flowers in the room and draped the sacred cloth on her, the one we had made from her T-shirts, in commemoration of her life of activism. How ironic that a person in a wheel chair had been such a dynamic activist! We placed a lotus blossom at her head. She looked like a saint. She would have said, "Oh, brother!"





Photographs by Susan Marynowski

How beautiful to be with Kathy in this chapel of our own making. Throughout the afternoon, the room filled with her closest friends and family.

At 4:30pm, we cleared the room of people. Her friends Sue, Julie, Randi, Patty and I then wrapped Kathy in the shroud, a muslin cloth that I had made with Marilyn from directions posted on a green burial internet site. It was a little awkward, even after two practices, but we just took our time. We had made a pocket bag of precious memories and placed this on her chest. Then we folded the shroud around her and positioned the sacred T-shirt cloth on top. We tied the wraps around her and bound her head and feet. We then placed Kathy's body in her van.

Shirley, Anita, and I went ahead to the Prairie Creek site to decorate a donkey cart with fronds, leaves, and flowers. The

We ... draped the sacred cloth on her, the one we had made from her T-shirts, in commemoration of her life of activism.

van with Kathy soon arrived. Friends gathered and placed Kathy's body on the floral bed of the cart. About fifty strong, we began the procession to the grave site, about a mile away through the woods, the two donkeys walking side by side.

Three boards lay across the grave site with Kathy's body on them. We had a

simple service of poems, prayers, and song. We lowered Kathy's body into the grave by the straps on the sling. The

foliage from the cart was her bed, the flowers her blanket. Everyone took turns covering her in earth—and love.

We covered the mound in pine needles. At the grave head, we planted the magnolia. As we slowly walked away from the grave, an owl hooted. 🦉

For more information about Prairie Creek Preserve Cemetery in North Florida, visit www.conservationburialinc.org.

The Power of Merit

by Andrew Holecek

One of the most effective things we can do to help the dead is to gather and dedicate merit to them. Merit is the cosmic currency of Buddhism. It's something we gather to benefit ourselves, and it's something we can transfer to benefit others. It's literally the stuff the world is made of. Learning about merit can strengthen our desire to gather and dedicate it.

The cosmology of merit may be difficult to grasp, but the practice of collecting and dedicating it is easily understood. Merit is gathered by performing good deeds. Delivering that merit to others is accomplished by dedicating it properly, which means doing so with conviction and loving motivation. If you just mouth the words, some benefit might trickle; if you really mean it, great benefit pours forth.

To transfer merit properly, perform the deed with the person to whom you want to dedicate it in mind. Afterwards say something simple, like: "I dedicate the merit of this action to all sentient beings, and especially to [insert their name]. May it bring them benefit and solace in their journey after death." You can also dedicate merit to those who are suffering from a loss to ease their pain.

The dead or dying person also gathers merit by being the cause for the helper's motivation to generate the merit. It's particularly helpful to perform dharmic deeds (those that serve the truth), because dharmic activity is considered the most valuable. Dharma (truth) is also the highest form of generosity. You can dedicate your spiritual practice, send money to a dharma center, or sponsor someone in retreat. You can donate to the construction of a spiritual project, like a stupa (Buddhist monument), monastery, or shedra (monastic college). Advanced Buddhist practitioners can perform or sponsor a feast in the name of the deceased. A "saving of lives" practice is especially helpful: rescuing animals that would otherwise die. An example would be buying and releasing worms from a bait shop.

You can give the possessions of the dead person to Goodwill (waiting a few days after they died to do so), contribute in their name to humanitarian projects like hospice, orphanages, or hospitals. You can give to a charity, volunteer for a worthy cause, plant trees, or pick up trash. The list of beneficial things you can do in their name is endless. The power of merit can also bring solace to those who wonder how a non-Buddhist might fare in the bardo (the after-death state). Any good person automatically accumulates merit and is taken care of by the force of that merit.

When you give your merit to all beings—not to just one—the merit doesn't lessen like a material offering might. Ironically, the merit grows. So by dedicating it to all beings, you're not watering the merit down—you're beefing it up.

The merit of an act can be lost if it's not dedicated. For example, if you get angry before the dedication, the anger can erase the merit. So you should dedicate the merit of your good actions every time you perform them, like hitting the "save" icon on your computer after you've written something important. Dedicate the merit from your meal or your exercise. Dedicate the merit after you read some dharma or after a day of work. Train yourself to dedicate the good that you do, and you may find yourself doing more good. Author B. Alan Wallace writes,

"Merit" can be understood as "spiritual power" that manifests in day-to-day experience. When merit, or spiritual power, is strong, there is little resistance to practicing dharma and practice itself is empowered. Tibetans explain that people who make rapid progress in dharma, gaining one insight after another, enter practice already having a lot of merit. By the same theory, it is possible to strive diligently and make little progress. Tibetans explain this problem as being due to too little merit. Merit is the fuel that empowers spiritual practice.

Just as merit can be accumulated, it can also be dissipated by doing harm. In

general, mental afflictions dissipate merit. Anger is the mental affliction that acts like a black hole to suck up merit and is worse than all others.

The classic way for Buddhists to gather merit is through the practice of the first five paramitas or "perfections" (literally "crossed over")—generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, and meditation. The paramitas are a Buddhist practice that culminates in the sixth paramita, prajna, the perfection of wisdom. Cultivating the four immeasurables—loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—also generates immeasurable merit. In daily activity, we can recite mantras and dedicate that recitation. There are endless liturgies to recite and dedicate, but one of the most powerful is "The King of Aspiration Prayers: The Aspiration for Noble Excellent Conduct" by Samantabhadra. (This can be downloaded from a number of online sources.)

Because gathering merit is so simple, and because it's not material, we don't believe in its power. How can it be so easy to help others, especially the dead? But the power of merit is fathomless. The esoteric practices aren't necessarily more effective than gathering and dedicating merit. Indeed, one of the reasons to do esoteric practices is to gather, magnify, and direct the merit to the dead. 🌐

*This article is excerpted from the forthcoming book *Preparing to Die: Practical Advice and Spiritual Wisdom from the Tibetan Buddhist Perspective* by Andrew Holecek. Holecek teaches internationally on sleeping, dreaming, and dying. For more information about his publications and teaching events, visit andrewholecek.com.*

Near-Death Wisdom: Response to Tragedy

by Eben Alexander, MD

We encounter such a range of emotions and experiences during the years of our lives in physical form—from the joys of new birth, happy laughter and friendship shared, to the grief of losing loved ones from our midst and the horror of unimaginable tragedies. What are we called to do or believe? The words, feeling, and knowing from my NDE come back to me: All is well. You can do nothing wrong.

Many ask, How can killing or causing suffering not be wrong? Does this

message from beyond apply to the lives we are living right here?

Indeed, I want to clarify that these messages came to me from that place where our consciousness or soul continues to live after the physical body dies. In that place which I was allowed to visit so clearly, and which opened my eyes and heart to a greater context for life here and now—there I was given to know the power of unconditional love and the limitless nature of soul and consciousness.

This piece of wisdom is profound and refers to the way our souls are loved without condition by the infinitely

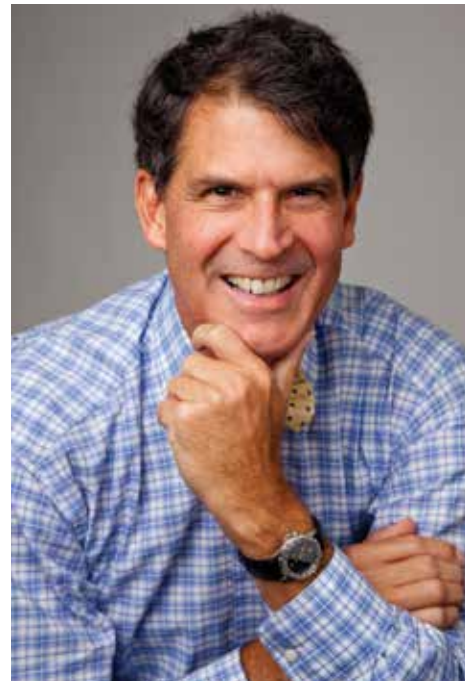
knowing and powerful God, Creator of all. It doesn't mean that we have permission or freedom here on Earth to hurt others, but neither does it mean that we've failed when we make mistakes of judgment, action, or inaction. What it does mean is that this physical life with all its challenges is neither the end of the world nor the end of our soul's journey.

It is when we allow ourselves to connect with and be surrounded by unconditional love that forgiveness happens, that patience transforms time, and that we

can begin to understand the power and meaning of the One-ness often referred to by great spiritual masters from all religious traditions throughout history.

Life here is not perfect. It is how we respond—with compassion, forgiveness, and Love—that makes all the difference.

Take time to grieve loss, to celebrate life, and to reflect, pray, meditate, sing or dance in your way, to breathe in the source of love that connects us all together, as One with the Divine. Take time to express gratitude for all of our blessings. 🌱



Dr. Eben Alexander is the author of #1 New York Times bestseller, Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the After-life. This article is excerpted from his "Eterna" newsletter, December 2012, www.eternea.org.



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Book Review

I Knew Their Hearts: The Amazing True Story of a Journey beyond the Veil to Learn the Silent Language of the Heart

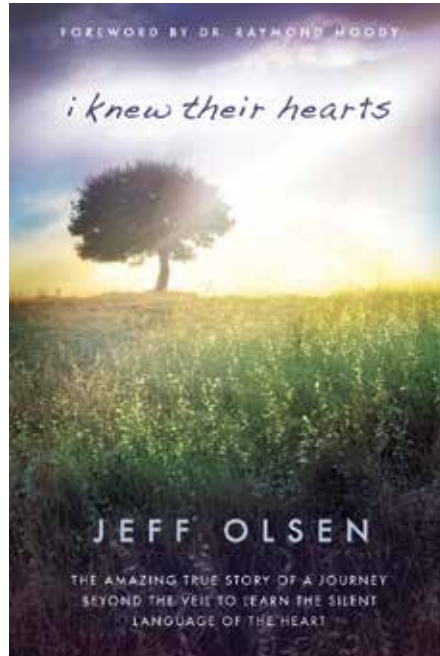
by Jeff Olsen Reviewed by Lee Webster

In simple prose and engaging style, Jeff Olsen tells his story of survival and redemption after sustaining near-fatal injuries in a car accident that left his wife and youngest son dead. In many ways, this short autobiography reads like a medical and spiritual self-help guide: how to not die when every system in your body has been compromised or broken; how to cope with massive physical and psychic pain after you have experienced the peace of death; how to overcome guilt, self-loathing, and unspeakable losses, and how to live well—for yourself, for family and friends, for those who have gone before.

Like many others who have reported near-death experiences, Olsen shares a newfound fearlessness surrounding death and a profound appreciation for the gifts of life. He describes an other-world that is also this world, one that is infused with love and light, that connects all parts and beings of the universe and beyond.

Olsen recounts in detail his sensation of separation from his damaged body, an event that occurs not once, but twice, both times followed by his integration with a larger world—earthly and beyond—and then by reintegration with self and his wrecked body. Through his out-of-body revelations, he found himself able to access a depth of empathy for others that was previously unknown to him—a precursor to practicing self-love. Enabled by his experience, he developed an ability to feel fully and deeply, however painful, however joyous the feelings.

But what makes his story compelling and unusual is the recounting of multiple and varied other threshold experiences that illuminated his spiritual journey toward healing. Throughout his recovery, shockingly vivid dreams, full sensory presences, and internally perceived voices erased the lines between his corporeal life and what lies beyond the veil, resulting in greater clarity and purpose.



Despite crippling pain—the amputation of his left leg, the disuse of his right arm, the infections and fevers and setbacks—Olsen continued to fight back to save his body and also to wage war on the emotional wounds that were easily as life-threatening. The degree to which Olson struggled with his body was surpassed only by his inner quest. He went beyond the expected platitudes of gratitude sprinkled throughout many similar accounts of near-death experiences, and asked some hard questions, starting with: Did I love enough?

I Knew Their Hearts is a love letter to life, to those in it, and to those who have gone before. It is a testament to the power of the fear of death and the equally empowering lack of it. It is also an affirmation of faith in the truest sense: accepting what appears before us without judgment.

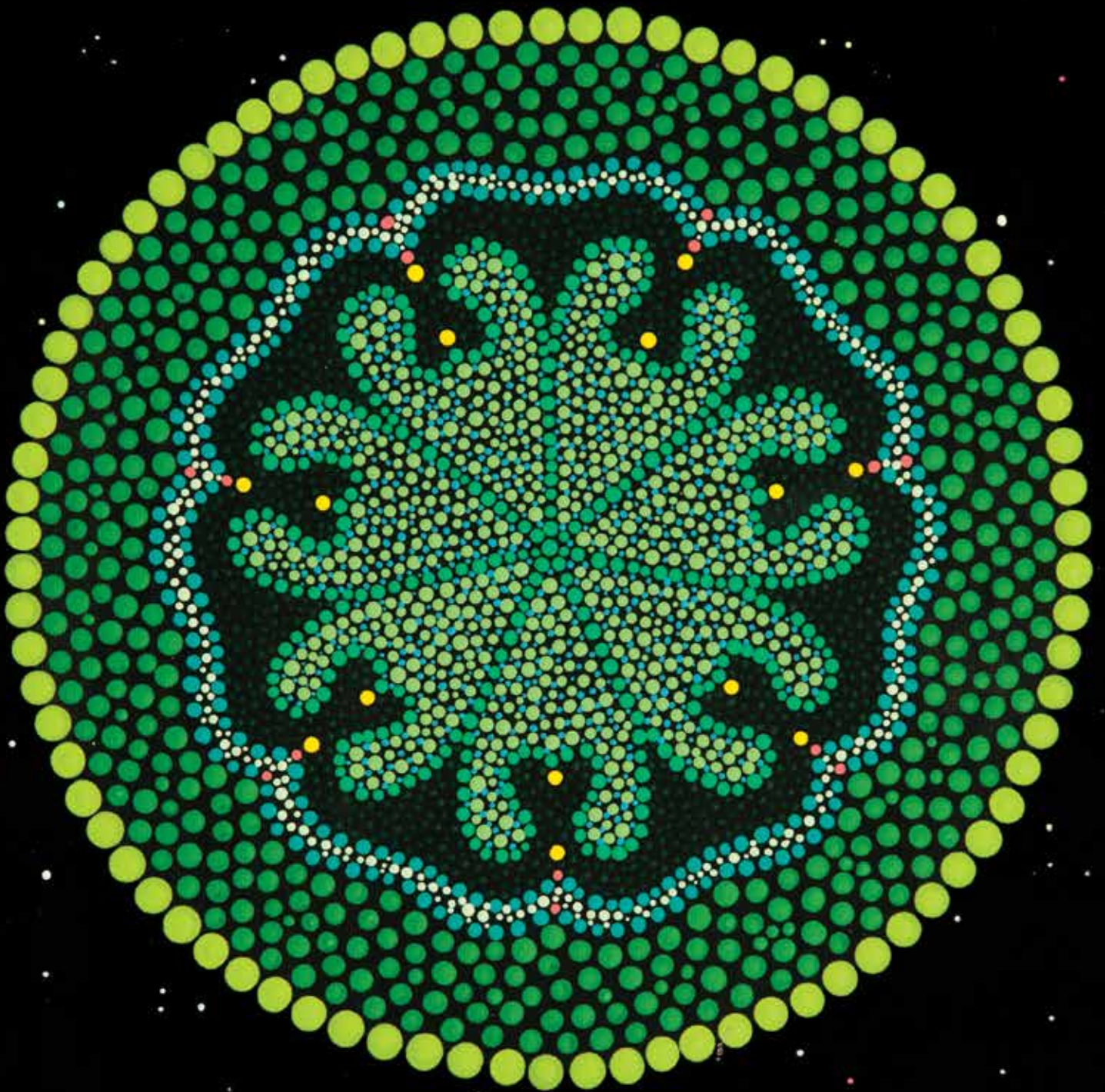
Olsen's story is deliberately inspirational, unapologetically religious (he is a devout Mormon), and yet—even for non-believers—it is infinitely approachable. For those seeking a greater exploration of the gifts of near-death experiences, it's well worth the read. 🌟

Paperback, 120pp, 5.8 x 8.7 inches
Plain Sight Publishing, September 2012



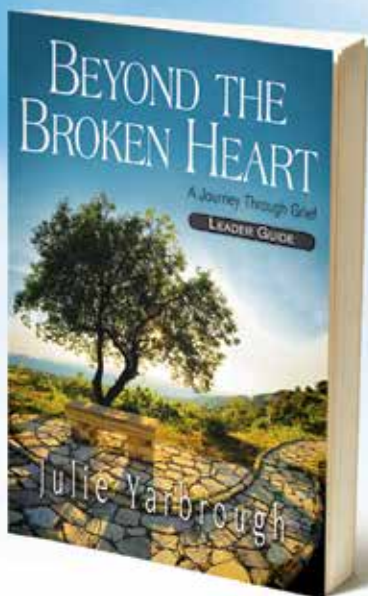
Lee Webster writes from her home in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. She is a frequent public speaker on the benefits of home funerals and green burial, a freelance writer, conservationist, gardener, quilt maker, and hospice volunteer. Contact Lee at turningleafhomefunerals@gmail.com.

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It is only with the heart that one can see rightly,
what is essential is invisible to the eye.

– *Little Prince*



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About the author:



Julie Yarbrough. Inspired by her personal experience after the death of her husband, Dr. Leighton Farrell, senior minister at Highland Park United Methodist Church for many years, Yarbrough established a support group for widows and widowers and began writing for persons who are grieving. She is president of Yarbrough Investments and lives in Dallas, Texas.

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