

Postcards From Heaven and Hell: Understanding the Near-Death Experience Through Art

Ryan Rominger, Palo Alto, CA

Abstract

Art making offers the opportunity to reflect upon ineffable experiences, including those surrounding death and dying. This article examines the artwork of two research participants who each reported a near-death experience (NDE). A transpersonal model was used to elicit the narratives and artwork of two individuals: one who experienced a pleasant NDE and one who experienced a distressing NDE. The author concludes that understanding the similarities and differences between pleasant and distressing NDEs may help to facilitate a better therapeutic alliance with this population and provide greater potential for client growth and transformation.

Review of the Literature

Traditionally transpersonal psychology has embraced the psychological value of religious and spiritual practices as well as spontaneous spiritual experiences that take one beyond the ego-bounded self in order to connect with something larger than or beyond (*trans*) the self (*persona*); (Hartelius, Caplan, & Rardin, 2007; Scotton, 1996; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). One element of transpersonal psychology that overlaps with traditional psychology and psychotherapy is an acknowledgment of religious and spiritual problems that may arise during spiritual practice. For example, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Developmental Disorders* includes specific criteria for diagnosing a “religious or spiritual problem” (American Psychological Association, 2000, p. 741). Therapists may use these criteria to assess therapeutic issues that are the result of religious or spiritual problems while simultaneously differentiating these same problems that occur with more severe clinical or personality disorders.

Transpersonal psychology also offers therapeutic models that attempt to describe the emergent processes involved in psycho-spiritual crisis, including models developed by Grof and Grof (1989) and Kason and Degler (1994). Grof and Grof introduced the term “spiritual emergency” to describe the process of transformation that is engaged, either intentionally or unintentionally, when focusing on one’s personal spiritual development. At times an individual experiences the process of spiritual develop-

ment as an easy progression (thus called *spiritual emergence*) and at other times spiritual changes are experienced as tumultuous to the individual, disrupting personal beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (thus called *spiritual emergency*) (Grof & Grof, 1989). Kason and Degler described this process—or more specifically the catalyzing event—as a “spiritually transformative experience” (1994, p. 17). Whatever the term used, the emphasis remains the same: A personal psycho-spiritual process that simultaneously integrates and disrupts the sense of self, creating havoc intra- and inter-psychically while seemingly connecting the individual to forces beyond the self.

One experience identified by both Grof and Grof (1989) and Kason and Degler (1994) as an example of a spiritual emergency is the near-death experience (NDE). NDEs are reported most often by people who have either clinically died and then revived or who have otherwise come close to physical death (Grosso, 1981). Questions of ontological source aside, individuals who have had NDEs have described experiencing ineffability, hearing someone tell them they have died, feeling peacefulness and quiet, hearing general noises, being in or traveling through a dark tunnel or void, having an out-of-body experience, meeting other beings such as religious figures and deceased relatives, encountering a being of light, experiencing a comprehensive life review, encountering a border or limit, and experiencing a process of return (Greyson, 1996; Moody, 1975; Ring, 1980, 1984a, 1984b). A few of the most commonly reported experiences include peace and pleasantness, separation from the physical body, seeing or entering a light, and time alteration (Greyson, 1983; Musgrave, 1997; Parnia, Waller, Yeates, & Fenwick, 2001; Ring, 1980). People who have some combination of these experiences have been identified as having a “core” NDE (Ring, 1980).

Not all NDEs have been found to be positive. Approximately 1% of NDE accounts are reported to be “distressing” or “hellish” (Gallup, 1982; Ring, 1984a). This low prevalence may be a result of underreporting due to fears of being stigmatized by family or caretakers (Greyson & Bush, 1992), facing personal emotions surrounding the NDE (Rominger, 2004), or thinking that one may be going crazy (Greyson, 1996). Greyson and Bush (1992) reported that a distressing experience could create a “pervasive sense of emptiness and fatalistic despair” (p. 104). Unfortunately, not enough is known about these distressing NDEs. One goal of the present study was to understand the distressing NDE in relation to the core NDE.

Editor’s note: Ryan Rominger, PhD, is a Global Core Faculty and Associate Dissertation Director with the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to the author at rominger.spirit@mac.com.

People who have had either a core NDE or a distressing NDE often feel that the experience has changed their daily lives. Those who have had a core NDE report less fear of death or feeling threatened by death and fewer instances of suicide ideation. They describe becoming more spiritual and less religious; gaining an increased sense of purpose and meaning in life; having an increased appreciation for life; feeling greater compassion for others, the environment, and the self; and experiencing myriad other changes in values and beliefs (Dougherty, 1990; Greyson, 1992, 1993, 1996, 1997; Greyson & Bush, 1992; Groth-Marnat & Summers, 1998; Kellehear, 1990; Moody, 1975; Musgrave, 1997; Ring, 1984a, 1995; Ring & Valarino, 1998; White, 1997). People who have had distressing NDEs have reported overwhelming emotions when remembering their experience (Rominger, 2004), a sense of emptiness and despair (Greyson & Bush, 1992), and disconnection from others (Greyson & Bush, 1992).

Unfortunately, less than optimal changes after an NDE occur with both distressing and core NDEs; the latter also may find that acclimation to life post-NDE can lead to marital difficulties, anger, depression, questioning of one's mental status, and trouble readapting to daily routine (Greyson & Bush, 1992). White (1997) found that it was not uncommon for those who had an NDE to feel angry that they were forced to leave the light (for those who felt they had progressed to this point) and return to the mundane, often pain-filled physical world. Considering the changes that may occur after an NDE, it is no wonder that it is not an experience that leads to a higher overall satisfaction with life (Greyson, 1994).

My own experience working with individuals who report pleasant core NDEs or distressing NDEs corresponds with the above claims. I have met or worked with 4 individuals who had a distressing NDE and more than 40 individuals who had a core NDE. In my expressive arts and spiritual guidance practice, I have seen many drawings by people who have had both types of NDEs and have witnessed numerous aborted attempts at reconnecting with an ineffable experience that many felt was lost. However, not all such attempts were filled with frustration. From the clients' own perspectives, some attempts to reconnect with such feelings were successful. Working with expressive arts helped them move one step closer to identifying, expressing, and integrating their feelings around the NDE and its aftereffects.

From a review of the literature, I found that very few distressing NDEs are discussed in detail. Near-death accounts that focus on or mention distressing NDEs are reported almost exclusively in the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* or through trade books on the subject (e.g., Bush, 2002; Greyson, 1996; Greyson & Bush, 1992; Ring, 1984a; White, 1997). The same scarcity of literature is true in the field of art therapy, which this article attempts to address. In fact, I did not find any peer-reviewed articles that studied expressive art from people who had an NDE, much less a comparison of the two types of NDEs. An understanding of art created in therapy by people who have had an NDE may increase the competency of their therapists, spiritual guides, and art therapists.

Exposure to the topic of near-death experiences raises awareness of its existence. This is particularly important when considering the number of people who may approach service providers for help in adjusting to life after an NDE. One estimate places the number of individuals with anomalous death-related experiences within the United States at roughly 15 million, which includes those who have had an NDE (Rominger, in press). When a therapist or spiritual director is aware that a client's work may express an NDE, the therapeutic process may help contextualize the experience and explore questions of death-related events. Furthermore, it may be critically important to acknowledge cultural values or stressors that the client relates to the NDE. According to Furn (1987), cross-cultural, environmental, and personal dilemmas occur when the NDE clashes with dominant Western cultural values or expectations. This can lead the client to feel at odds with the surrounding culture, even if he or she lived comfortably within that same culture previously. Finally, it is useful to compare the differences and similarities between core NDEs and distressing NDEs. When key differences do arise, the question in therapy becomes how these differences impact the aftereffects of an NDE, which ultimately must be lived with and integrated into the person's life. A comparison of artwork between these two populations may reveal differences in emotional reactions, levels of concrete or abstract thinking processes surrounding the event, use of media, or potentially greater integration of the NDE.

Method

This article presents a comparison of art imagery from two individuals who participated in a mixed methods study that focused on the integration of the aftereffects of NDEs (Rominger, 2004). Eleven individuals (6 female and 5 male) participated in four group sessions over a 5-week period. Quantitative data gathered by means of a spirituality scale and a life-change scale were collected one week before and after the study, and also 6 weeks after the study had ended. Qualitative interview data were collected after participants completed the group sessions.

Participants were recruited through a local newspaper, local NDE-related meetings, and word of mouth. All participants were self-selected, and no participants were eliminated due to screening procedures. Participants ranged from 31 to 80 years old with an average age of 49 years. Religious affiliation was diverse and included Catholic, Christian Protestant, Christian mystic, Eckankar, and Jewish, as well as combined practices or no religious affiliation. The average lapsed time since the NDE was 27.85 years.

A total of three groups comprised the study; one group had 2 participants, one group had 3 participants, and one group had 6 participants. During the weekly sessions participants engaged in group spiritual guidance (also called spiritual direction) and expressive arts. Spiritual guidance is a process of ongoing dialogue between an inquiring individual and his or her guide (Hardy, 2000). The spiritual aspect provided is one of metaphorically "walking with" or traveling with another along the spiritual path, through activities

that may include both dialogue and art therapy. In the case of this study, spiritual guidance occurred in a group format.

Each group session started with 1 hour of guided discussion on a weekly topic followed by one to one and a half hours of art making using oil or chalk pastels, paint, or charcoal on paper. Participants could paint or draw as much as they wished and were only asked to think of the discussion at hand when making their art pieces. Weekly topics were arranged sequentially based on the typical progression of a core NDE (Moody, 1975; Ring, 1980, 1984a): from dying, coming out of the body, and going into the light (Session 1); life review and coming back into the body (Session 2); changes and aftereffects (Session 3); and changes or feelings about the previous weeks' discussions and work (Session 4). Presented below are the stories and expressive work of two participants who were part of the larger study (Rominger, 2004). One had a pleasant core NDE whereas the other had a distressing experience.

Luke

Luke (pseudonym), a Caucasian male in his mid fifties, had his near-death experience in his early twenties during a surgical procedure. Luke reported that he remembered being in pain, going into surgery, having an NDE, and waking up later in the hospital's recovery unit. During the surgery he felt himself suddenly in a space filled with light, meeting a being made of light. He experienced an alteration of time and expanded knowing, and remembered hearing beautiful music. Luke did not recall having a life review or traveling through a tunnel; however, his account falls into the category of core NDE, and many of the aftereffects noted in his group sessions focused on the positive changes that occurred for him in the years following his experience. Now, some 30 years later, Luke felt as though his NDE had contributed directly to his eclectic spiritual outlook on life. The NDE had influenced his belief in an afterlife, his overall relaxed attitude toward his life, and even his choice of profession. Luke also felt that his experience affected his intimate and family relationships, at times leading to a sense of distance between himself and his then partner because of different beliefs about spirituality and the afterlife. During one session in particular Luke spoke of the beautiful music he heard while he was in the light, which he believed had occurred after dying and coming out of his body. While speaking of the music, Luke was moved to tears until he could no longer speak. In this moment, he felt he had arrived at a point of ineffability.

Charles

Charles (pseudonym), a middle-aged Caucasian male, had his NDE during childhood. While riding his bike Charles hit the back of a parked car. A piece of the car went through his eye socket and into his skull. Charles said that he heard his relatives scream and reported watching them from above while hovering next to the lamp of a streetlight as they put him into a car and drove him to the hospital. Some 30 years later, Charles said that he distinctly remem-

bers the feeling of the darkness around him and described it as follows: "Think of all the bad things you experience in life happening all at once, multiply that by 100, and that is just beginning to be similar to what I felt." Because of this perception of darkness (and a speck of light that quickly receded from him while he was hovering next to the street lamp), Charles said that he attempted to reenter his body. When he tried, however, he felt as if he were slipping into his body only to slip back out again. Charles stated, "I just wanted back into my body. I didn't care about anything else. Just wanted to get back in." During his NDE he was terrified of the darkness and remembered thinking that he would be in "really big trouble" with his parents.

Charles's experience clearly falls within the distressing NDE category. The developmental timing of his experience also is significant in terms of how he managed his inner experiences post-NDE. Charles's anxiety that his parents would be very upset with him could be expected from a child in the concrete operations stage of development, when aspects of "good" and "bad" judgments relating to social relationships are learned (Cole & Cole, 1993, p. 449). It is noteworthy that Charles did not experience going through a tunnel, going into the light, having a life review, or meeting anyone else while he was out of his body. As suggested in his pictures and his interview, Charles presented the biological death concept pertaining to the moment of death as well as the psychological concept of emptiness and sorrow and a metaphysical perception of heaven and hell (in some sense a space between), all of which are unique concepts described by a child in the concrete operational stage of development (Yang & Chen, 2002). The aftereffects that Charles described during the sessions corresponded with those identified by Greyson and Bush (1992) and White (1997). After his experience, Charles believed that he was going to hell when he died; it no longer mattered what he did in life. During adolescence Charles got into much trouble and in his early adulthood he continued this trend. Although Charles's compassion for others outside his immediate family and friends was minimal, he reported that the loss of his eye increased his sensitivity to the world around him.

As with Luke, family relationships post-NDE also became a mixture of support and emotional distancing. Yet Charles reported that he never once shared his experience with his family. It was not until participating in our group sessions that he told his wife about his experience. Charles was raised religiously conservative but he reported that he felt distant from church leaders, often feeling that they were merely talking about spirituality whereas he had actually "experienced it." This internal dissonance led Charles into a superficial relationship with his church and to seek out other beliefs from religious traditions that appealed to his personal practice.

Results

Before comparing these two cases, several things must be noted. First, there is much variance within both positive and distressing NDEs. Not all people report traveling

through a tunnel. Some report experiencing a bright being full of love, and others do not. Similarly, some people who have had distressing NDEs report meeting devilish beings; others report being taken on a journey to a dark place, or experiencing darkness surrounding them, as in the case of Charles. Second, not all people experience the same changes after they “return” from their NDE. Only some individuals report dramatic changes and for those that do, not all changes are positive, even for people who have had core NDEs. Luke and Charles both spoke of difficulty in their intimate relationships, questioning whether to tell their loved ones of their experience and wondering how their loved ones would respond to the NDE disclosure. After the experience, ontological and existential fears seemed to permeate Charles’s relationship with his spirituality and his church, whereas for Luke his NDE led him to spiritual insight and a closer connection with his personal spiritual practice.

Culture also influences the interpretation of an NDE. Kellehear (2008) stated that whereas Western descriptions of the NDE contained the core elements noted above, NDEs described by individuals from non-Western countries contained key differences related to the particular culture of origin. For example, in India the individual most often encountered after death is reported to be Yamaraja, the God of Death (Pasricha, 2008); for Christians, Jesus Christ or a being of light is most often reported (Ring, 1980, 1984a, 1993). NDE elements that are found to be similar across cultures include an awareness that one is dead or dying, an out-of-body experience (in many cultures, but not all), traveling to a different place or realm, seeing deceased relatives or religious figures, and returning to the body (Kellehear, 2008). Two elements that are common for NDEs reported in English-speaking Anglo-Western countries that are absent in other populations include life review and tunnel experiences (Kellehear, 2008). However, considering that the two individuals featured in this article are both from the United States and are English-speaking Euro-Americans, their cultural background likely is similar enough for a basic comparison.

Finally, Luke and Charles had their experiences at different ages. Luke was in his early twenties whereas Charles was about 7 years old. Luke and Charles were at different developmental stages in their lives at the time of their NDEs and this may have contributed to different imagery. Unfortunately little NDE literature addresses the phenomenon from a developmental perspective. Morse (1990) described many childhood NDEs and these accounts were similar to NDEs reported by adults. One noteworthy absence within childhood NDEs is the life review, and there also seem to be fewer instances of the tunnel experience.

Finally, Charles likely had little family support to discuss his NDE, which is not uncommon among Western families that shelter their children from death-related discussions. Luke, in contrast, likely had greater resources to address the memories of his experience as well as any changes that may have occurred in relation to it.

Similarities

Similarities were found in both the narratives and the pictures drawn by Charles and Luke. Each story started with the approach of death. Both individuals came close to dying and reported being “outside” themselves, as if in another place. These two experiential elements alone could leave a person confused about the structure of life and existence, not to mention how the NDE relates to one’s religious and spiritual practices. A dramatic change in spiritual beliefs and attitudes can shake the foundations of a person’s connection with belief-orienting institutions (church, synagogue, or mosque) and family religion and spirituality. For example, Luke exhibited more openness and acceptance, incorporating many eclectic religious concepts into his spiritual practice. Charles maintained his core religious tradition but held an internal tension between belief and disbelief. His doubt and conflict with his church and family led to distancing. Charles later turned to older family spiritual traditions, especially Native American traditions.

A second similarity was that of darkness. In his first picture (Figure 1) Luke drew a glittery self coming through darkness and in his third picture (Figure 3) he drew the difference between his experience of darkness before the NDE and that of being in a glittery rainbow of colors during the NDE, the two separated by a bright glittery line. Charles also drew darkness in his first picture (Figure 5). In fact, he drew darkness in all of his pictures (Figures 5–8) with the last picture (Figure 8), a rain cloud breaking as the sun is coming out, holding the least amount of darkness. More importantly, Charles drew a balancing of the darkness in his life: At first the darkness was all consuming but in later pictures the darkness became balanced by red or lighter colors that he said represented love.

Another notable similarity was that of change and the NDE’s influence on the two men’s outlooks on life. Both Luke and Charles were young when they came close to death and they both remembered the event vividly; each felt that the experience still influenced their relationships, belief systems, attitudes, and even behaviors. For Luke, his NDE ultimately led him to a career in a helping profession, whereas for Charles his NDE led him into despair and disobedience. However, both men felt that working with the drawings helped them understand their experiences better and also provided a space for them to safely open up to exploring many of their emotions surrounding their experience.

Differences

Three important differences are worth noting. First, the use of media was quite different: Luke, who experienced a positive core NDE, had a strong preference for glitter paint, which he used in each of his paintings (Figures 1–4). The use of glitter paint was common for most of the people I worked with in the visual arts who’d had a core NDE. Glitter paint and similar materials gave texture to the light experience that the participants attempted to describe. As Luke told me, the use of glitter paint was merely another



Figure 1 Luke, Session 1: Coming out of the body, through the tunnel, and into the light



Figure 3 Luke, Session 3: The aftereffects

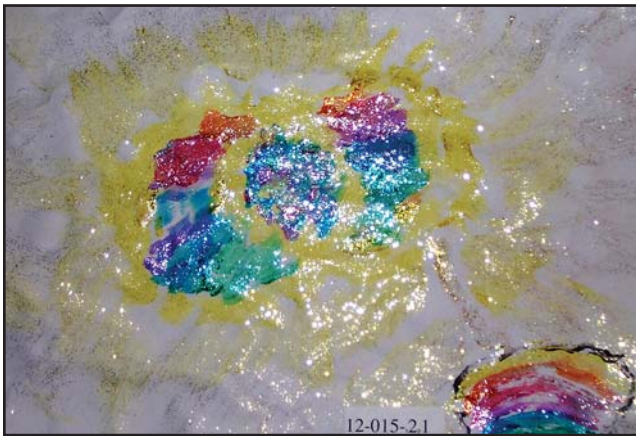


Figure 2 Luke, Session 2: The life review, coming back into the body



Figure 4 Luke, Session 4: Reflection on the past three sessions

attempt at trying to express something ineffable. Charles, on the other hand, did not use glitter paint but focused instead on describing the darkness and how it had influenced his life. Charles also drew many more jagged lines (Figures 5–7) and from the start depicted his actual accident (Figure 5). Whereas Luke used more abstract, emotive content, Charles preferred concrete depictions of events or specific images. These differences possibly were related to personal painting style or to cultural, social, or educational differences, or to differences in age and developmental level when the event occurred. Nonetheless, the presence of light or darkness seems to be a characteristic element in artistically expressing either the pleasant or distressing aspects of an NDE and its reported aftereffects.

A second difference related to the painting process. Luke maintained a certain level of expression of the light, color, and glittery qualities of his experience. Many of his pictures are similar in tone and quality. Charles's pictures, by contrast, depicted his story and his interaction with his experience. His first picture (Figure 5) depicted the experience of dying and feeling the darkness. Subsequent pictures (Figures 6 and 7) focused on the changes that he believed were due to his NDE, and in the final session he expressed

a changed relationship with his experience (Figure 8). His picture indicated that he no longer saw only darkness; light and love had “entered the picture.” As depicted in his final scene, he was now looking toward an emerging sun after seeing the debris that a violent storm had deposited on the shores next to a deep ocean. As a metaphor, it is quite expressive of his transforming inner experience.

Finally, both men engaged their emotions that surrounded their NDEs and gained a greater understanding about themselves and their experience; both felt freer to share their experience with others during and after the art and spiritual guidance sessions. However, Luke described his change as one of greater appreciation for his experience and an awareness of a “thinning of the veil” as he felt his spiritual practice increase. He also reported that he felt more connected to “the light” and to others. He said, “I think that the main thing that has changed for me is that I am just more willing to talk to people about the NDE experience...and I am able to express it better.”

Charles's experiences, by contrast, focused on his emerging ability to simply begin to mention his experience to others, including his wife. He noted that one of the main changes for him were his relationships with people.



Figure 5

Charles, Session 1: Coming out of the body, through the tunnel, and into the light



Figure 7 Charles, Session 3: The aftereffects



Figure 6 Charles, Session 2: The life review, coming back into the body



Figure 8 Charles, Session 4: Reflection on the past three sessions

Charles reported that drawing forced him to get his feelings out onto the picture and then to reflect upon what he had drawn, finding comfort around his own thoughts and feelings associated with the experience. He said,

[The sessions] made me feel a lot more comfortable because...I still felt the feelings as a seven-and-a-half-year-old kid, you know? And that was really scary. Thinking "oh my God. I'm outside of my body. I'm in big trouble. I'm in huge trouble. This is not where I want to be. I don't like it here."...It's a lot easier after drawing the pictures, talking about it, hearing other people's stories, you know? That doesn't have to be the end.

Conclusion

Based on this study of the different types of near-death experiences, I recommend that spiritual guides and art therapists familiarize themselves with the phenomenon and its expression in art imagery. The stereotypical core NDE is not the only experience and an NDE may be distressing or may influence a person's future in highly significant ways. Both types of NDEs may describe similar stories of feeling the sense of coming out of the body while near death. However, when probing deeper into the phenomenon and its aftereffects, notable differences may

arise. These differences may affect a number of important elements in the progression of therapeutic or spiritual guidance, including the art media chosen, the individual's comfort level with describing the emotions surrounding the experience, and the level of concreteness or abstraction expressed in art. As art therapists encounter clients who have had an NDE, greater understanding may be gained about the diversity of the phenomenon and its influence on the therapy experience.

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