

Letters to the Editor

Were Some Shamans Near-Death Experiencers First?

To the Editor:

In his book, *The Shaman: His Symbols and His Healing Power*, Spencer Rogers (1982) discussed some ways in which people received the shamanistic call. While becoming a shaman may be due to many events, such as having dreams, being struck by lightning, seeing visions or hallucinations, experiencing the trauma of losing family members, or being born by foot presentation, apparently some people became shamans by virtue of "having survived a deadly disease" (p. 15).

Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's studies of the Andaman Islanders pointed out that if a "man should . . . die and then come back to life again, he is, by that adventure, endowed with the power that makes a medicine-man" (1948, pp. 176-77). Radcliffe-Brown presented anecdotal evidence of two such persons: one was thought to be dead by his friends prior to his becoming a healer, and the other was reported to have died and come back to life again three times.

M.A. Czaplicka's work on Siberian natives suggests that for these people the shamanistic call may be due to, among other things, "dangerous and protracted illness" (1914, p. 174). For example, a Yakut-Tungus shaman reported that when he was 20 years old, he was very ill. He said he "began 'to see with my eyes, to hear with my ears' that which others did not see or hear" (p. 173). Nine years later, he became so ill that he was on the verge of death until he began to practice as a shaman.

Czaplicka went on to say that a Buryat child is chosen to be a shaman, in part, by having "fits during which he is unconscious" (p. 185). The Buryat believe that at these times the soul of the child leaves its body to be trained by deceased shamans. After a time, "the soul of the child returns to the body [to resume] its normal life" (p. 185).

Michael Harner echoed Czaplicka's contention about shamanistic powers being endowed by virtue of nearly dying. Harner wrote, "In aboriginal Siberia, a death/rebirth experience was often a major source of shamanistic knowledge" (1980, p. xii).

Alfred Kroeber claimed that for most of the former Californian Native American tribes the prospective shaman commonly became sick in order to obtain shamanistic powers. The future medicine-man "lies down; his relatives are afraid he will die, and call a shaman for treatment" (1952, p. 311).

Rogers wrote that a prospective shaman of the Yurak or Samoyed of eastern Asia will remain unconscious for days, "apparently dead, and may be nearly buried" (1982, p. 16). During the time he is unconscious, he is thought to have an out-of-body experience to train him as a shaman.

Finally, in *Closer to the Light*, Melvin Morse and Paul Perry wrote that Black Elk "had a near-fatal illness at age nine that put him in touch with the Light" (1990, p. 124). Apparently, during his near-fatal illness, Black Elk saw, among other things, deceased relatives and a bright light surrounding the earth. Morse and Perry also stated that the Indian guru Paramahansa Yogananda had a near-death experience (NDE) at age 8. A bright light encompassed Yogananda's body, which seemed to cure him of his illness, and enabled him to illuminate others later in his life.

From the above descriptions, it would seem that some shamans were near-death experiencers first. For some, their NDE bestowed them with shamanistic powers, whether or not they wanted such powers.

Kenneth Ring, while not directly addressing the issue of shamanism, alluded to healing powers developing subsequent to an NDE in *Heading Toward Omega* (1984). Ring wrote that "the NDE may establish a potential for some individuals to become healers, but whether that potential is activated may depend largely on events subsequent to the NDE itself" (1984, p. 332).

Margot Grey supported Ring's supposition; in her opinion, "a number of NDErs find that they spontaneously develop the ability to heal" (1985, p. 100). She described the case of a man who is now a practicing healer subsequent to his NDE, who claims to have helped thousands of persons.

In our technological society that accredits medical providers based on the Western medical model, perhaps the healing powers of NDErs lie dormant or go unacknowledged, or are suppressed by accusations of charlatanism. By contrast, in some non-Western cultures the healing

or shamanistic powers are not only nurtured and encouraged, but, in some cases, demanded of people who have nearly died.

References

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Bringing the NDE Home

To the Editor:

I recently read a copy of Barbara Harris and Lionel Bascom's book *Full Circle*, which pointed out for me the problems involved in making a transition from the near-death experience (NDE) back to the less luminous world. Harris and Bascom phrased the question in something of the form: "If the reality of life as discovered in the NDE is light and love, why are our lives so often in turmoil?"

The answer is, to use an analogy from earthly journeys, that visiting Paris does not make a person a Parisian. To be a Parisian a person has to take up residence in Paris. For the NDEr this involves making the perceptions during the NDE the core of your belief system, your intellectual home.

The first step in this process is accepting the experience and accept-