

Letters to the Editor

More on Psychomanteum Experimentation

To the Editor:

I usually do not respond to material printed in journals, but I feel obligated to speak out about my concern in regard to a letter in the Winter 1998 issue of the *Journal*, entitled "Risks of Psychomanteum Experimentation" (Brodsky, 1988). Like Beverly Brodsky, I too agree with some of Bruce Greyson's (1996) cautions regarding the use of the psychomanteum, as presented in his review of Raymond Moody and Paul Perry's *Reunions* (1993). What I must strongly object to is the publication of Brodsky's letter, because the material presented was extremely slanted. The consequences of utilizing a psychomanteum listed by Brodsky totally misrepresent this device and are inaccurate.

Brodsky wrote that she found "the mirror's capacity for calling upon and being visited unawares by spirits, to be personally chilling" (p. 142). She then added that, after she and a couple of her friends performed their own experiments with a psychomanteum, several of these individuals were plagued with a variety of traumas, ranging from severe emotional distress to physical ailments. She continued by suggesting that the break-up of a marriage for one of the participants was also related to the psychomanteum experience: "Even sadder was the fate of the third participant, a near-death experiencer who seemed to be very stable and well adjusted prior to this time, despite the rape and murder of her teenage daughter several years ago. Her marriage . . . broke up, and her daughter, the twin of the murdered daughter who was visited in the psychomanteum, ran off with a man who had previously been jailed for kidnaping her" (p. 142).

As a clinician who has worked with thousands of trauma survivors across the nation and who has published six books on topics related to this issue, I will agree that experimentation with the psychomanteum, along with near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, kundalini meditation, past-life regression, guided visual imagery, hypnosis, therapeutic empty chair work, after-death communication experiences, and

a whole host of other psychologically or spiritually based activities can trigger for the participants strong emotions, unresolved grief issues, inner conflict, confusion, and existential crisis, and even repressed traumatic experiences. I have spent most of my professional life exploring trauma, and I am fully aware that experiences in the here and now are very capable of pulling up, from the consciousness or unconscious, feelings related to past trauma experiences (see Wills-Brandon, 1990). And, as a result of this, some individuals can act out with addictive behavior, self-destructive actions, and many other dysfunctions. There will always be consequences to any form of personal growth activity. How these consequences are handled is dependent upon the mental health of the individual at that time.

To state or insinuate that the psychomanteum or any other such activity is directly responsible for the consequences presented in this letter is, in my opinion, extremely inaccurate; and for the Journal to publish this letter is concerning. Material such as this tells only part of a much more involved story and gives the reader a very biased presentation. Also, such action encourages the author and reader to focus on the psychomanteum as the total basis for psychological distress, preventing the resolution of the true causes of such triggered consequences. The publication of Brodsky's letter has distracted the intense psychological stress of a murder, rape, divorce, or kidnaping off these tragedies and placed it squarely on the shoulders of the psychomanteum experience.

The psychomanteum did not create the psychological difficulties discussed in Brodsky's letter. What it did do is act as a catalyst for difficulties that were already present before the experience. As an individual who deals with trauma survivors weekly, I can tell you that mundane experiences such as listening to the radio, watching a movie, or reading a book can create a great deal of emotional pain for trauma survivors who have not completely worked through the pain of their loss, abuse, anger, or grief. The environment is full of triggers capable of revealing pain that was once forgotten.

I hope that in the future, all the facts of a situation such as this will be explored completely before being presented in a forum such as the Journal.

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Beverly Brodsky Responds

To the Editor:

In response to Carla Wills-Brandon's concerns about the possibility that negative reactions following the psychomanteum experimentation are caused solely by objective, external triggers, I reiterate the final statement in my previous letter (Brodsky, 1998) that cause and effect cannot be proven in these cases. I wish only to echo Raymond Moody's point in the closing pages of *Reunions* (Moody and Perry, 1993) that this is truly a Pandora's box that should be respected as such, and not approached with an atmosphere of naive playfulness, which I feel he encourages.

Pharmaceuticals like tobacco and peyote were used as sacraments for centuries in Native American traditions with no evidence of addiction, abuse, or emotional harm, because their culture brought the user safely through what might have been dangerous experiences for the novice. Millennia of denial and suppression have cut off Western culture from knowledge used by the ancients in their prophetic temples. The psychomanteum is a powerful window peering through a glass darkly at the abyss between life and death. Its use would be more responsible in a healing, supportive context such as Moody has arranged in his Theater of the Mind or as part of transpersonal therapeutic grief work.

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EMDR, ADCs, NDEs, and the Resolution of Loss

To the Editor:

I commend Allan Botkin for publishing his interesting and provocative article in the Spring 2000 issue of the Journal on inducing after-death communications (ADCs) using eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). EMDR is an exciting addition to other methods of treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). And that someone else has linked EMDR to near-death experiences (NDEs) and ADCs is extremely exciting to my wife, Sharon Horacek, and to me. Sharon is a trained level I and level II practitioner of EMDR and she and I presented a paper at the EMDR International Association Conference held in Las Vegas in June, 1999, in which we discussed using EMDR to treat the traumatic and stressful events that often trigger NDEs, trauma sometimes associated with NDEs themselves, and trauma connected with some of the aftereffects of NDEs (Horacek and Horacek, 1999). Our paper included detailed information on using EMDR with near-death experiencers. Also, Sharon has used EMDR in numerous other situations involving trauma, including persons suffering PTSD grief reactions.

Botkin's article gave a detailed and clear description of how EMDR developed and how he has used it to induce ADCs in several clients. But I do have a couple of concerns about some of his views on NDEs and, especially, his understanding of grieving and his view that EMDR-induced ADCs have brought about the "complete resolution of loss" in his clients. My concerns do not detract from my view that Botkin is involved in a very important treatment modality that shows great promise for offering comfort to grievors who are exhibiting PTSD symptoms.

My first concern involves Botkin's view of what constitutes an NDE. He wrote about the sequence of events in NDEs originally described by Raymond Moody (1975): "It should be noted that the sequence is not invariant, and frequently *only one* or a few of the elements are reported" (Botkin, 2000, p. 206, italics added). This is a curious definition of NDEs

to use in a research article, rather than using one of the two well-known weighted scales commonly used to quantify NDEs with minimum cutoff scores to define an NDE (Greyson, 1983, 1990; Ring, 1980). One robin does not make a spring. If the one characteristic NDE element a person reports is leaving the body or entering a tunnel, then that experience is generally called an *out-of-body experience* or a *tunnel experience* rather than an NDE. Experiencing one element or just a few would usually not come close to meeting the minimum cutoff score to qualify as an NDE on either standard scale. In the research literature, out-of-body or tunnel experiences or events comprised of just a few typical NDE features are also sometimes referred to as *NDE-related* or *NDE-like* phenomena. Consequently, some clients that Botkin might have called NDErs might not qualify as such if a more precise and accurate measure were applied.

My second concern is more serious than the first because it involves what Botkin claimed was the outcome of his EMDR-induced ADCs. No less than 13 times Botkin wrote that inducing ADCs led to the “complete resolution of grief” or the “complete resolution of the loss.” Since this claim was repeated so often and included in the article abstract, one would expect that Botkin would first have explained what that phrase means and second have included both evidence of such resolution and references to important works on grieving that back up Botkin’s understanding of and conclusions about the grieving process. However, his article contained no references to the research literature on grief, and his conclusions were simply stated as such with little supportive evidence. I realize that Botkin was writing as a clinician rather than as a researcher, but clinical impressions should be supported by additional evidence to bolster radical conclusions.

Throughout his article, Botkin seemed to use the phrases “complete resolution of grief” and “complete resolution of loss” interchangeably. But current understandings of grieving do not tend to identify acute grief reactions as constituting the entire grieving process. The model that Botkin seemed to accept views grieving as a time-limited process in which one is gradually healed and returned to “normal.” In that view, one could work through or resolve acute grief responses such as anger and guilt and eventually end or complete the grieving process. That model, which has its roots in the work of Sigmund Freud (1917/1957) and Erich Lindemann (1944), was popular in the 1970s and 1980s in the works of Colin Murray Parkes (1972), John Bowlby (1980), William Worden (1982), Beverly Raphael (1983), and Therese Rando (1984). Lindemann argued that “uncomplicated” grieving should be completed in four to six weeks. By the middle 1980s this time limit was extended to six months to a year or more. As early as 1984 a blue-ribbon committee

sponsored by the National Academy of Science's Institute of Medicine reviewed grief research up to that point and concluded that there was no clear, fixed end point for the grieving process, that for many people the process continues for a lifetime, and that the process is much more complicated than early grief theorists thought (Osterweis, Solomon, and Green, 1984).

The latter part of the 1980s and the 1990s saw an explosion of research on this issue that pointed out that, although one can resolve acute grief reactions and adapt to the loss, nevertheless a basic sense of loss continues and a continuing relationship with the deceased loved one persists (Horacek, 1991, 1995; Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, 1996). C. S. Lewis (1963) wrote, in describing his grief over the death of his wife, that the basic sense of loss is like an amputation or dismemberment. That is, a person who has a leg amputated might work through a series of grief reactions, learn to function without the use of the leg, and adapt to the loss; yet to the extent that each morning the person wakes up to the experience that the leg is still missing, the basic sense of loss continues indefinitely.

Botkin claimed that inducing ADCs led to the complete resolution of grief and the complete resolution of the loss. I can accept that EMDR-induced ADCs can completely resolve the trauma associated with grief reactions; that is what EMDR is all about. But it is difficult for me to accept from Botkin's description that these ADCs completely resolve the basic sense of loss for his clients and that this aftereffect continues after the sessions. In the five cases Botkin summarized, there was no direct quotation from his clients that resolution of the basic sense of loss occurred. It may have been Botkin's clinical impression that that occurred, but he did not provide convincing evidence in his clients' words. Resolving grief trauma is not the same as resolving the basic sense of loss, and Botkin's clients did not report that they no longer missed their deceased loved ones.

Again, I think that Botkin's use of EMDR-induced ADCs shows great promise for offering comfort to grieverers exhibiting PTSD symptoms associated with the loss of a loved one. But I am unconvinced that such a method can completely resolve the basic sense of loss.

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Allan Botkin Responds

To the Editor:

I thank Bruce Horacek for having taken an interest in my article. I welcome the opportunity to provide further clarification.

First, the findings I presented were derived from clinical observations, not from research. My goal in publishing the article was simply to share the induction technique with others. I have some confidence that other therapists trained in eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) who follow the procedure as described will

achieve similar outcomes. So far, interested colleagues have been able to induce after-death communications (ADCs) reliably after some instruction. My hope is that other professionals will test my clinical observations in a more rigorous and scientific manner.

Second, I am aware that my conclusions are not consistent with current thinking in the field. However, my ideas are new, not old. Although I do not believe that a sense of loss is generally time limited, I used the terms *grief* and *loss* in an interchangeable manner because, when it comes to ADCs induced with EMDR, there is no difference. Both acute grief and a lifelong sense of loss respond equally well to the procedure. In fact, a high percentage (more than 40 percent) of my cases (more than 500) are clearly not acute grief reactions, and in these cases, there are also no associated symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. These patients were treated for a sense of loss that continued for many years (sometimes decades) after they had successfully worked through their acute phase of grief. In short, whether acute grief or a protracted sense of loss is involved, grief/loss is resolved by an ADC induced with EMDR.

An important distinction will perhaps further clarify this issue. I now regret not including this discussion in my article. I believe that there are two levels of a sense of loss. The more painful and deeper level is a feeling of disconnection, a realization or feeling that our loved one is gone. ADCs induced with EMDR provide survivors with an experiential reconnection that resolves this deep pain. It should be obvious, however, that even in these cases, nothing can bring our loved one back to life as we generally know it, and certain life experiences, such as waking up in the morning together or holidays, can no longer be shared in the usual way. The loss of these shared activities does not fully resolve with an ADC. However, having resolved the deeper sense of loss with an induced ADC, the loss of shared activities, even at the most difficult times, becomes more tolerable, and survivors are able to experience positive feelings and memories of the deceased, as well as more fully enjoy their relationships with surviving loved ones.

I am grateful that Horacek's well-intended and scholarly criticisms provided me an opportunity to further clarify a very important aspect of my report. Although all prior feedback has been positive, I expect that some future responses may be less well-intended, and perhaps some even hostile. Skepticism will take a variety of forms. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to take the risk. It seems to me that EMDR-induced ADCs have the potential to alleviate a great deal of suffering. It is my

hope that others, both EMDR trained therapists and clients/patients, will put their beliefs on hold long enough to give it a try.

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Religious Wars in the NDE Movement

To the Editor:

I heartily commend the Editor and the editorial board of the *Journal* for their airing of the controversy surrounding the NDE “religious wars” in the Summer 2000 issue (Ring, 2000; Sabom, 2000). This is a courageous stance, especially given the subject matter, but it is one of infinite value to everyone interested in near-death experiences. As a scholar serving on the editorial boards of several other juried journals, I was overjoyed to see what is all too rare in most academic periodicals: creating a public forum where the internecine conflicts among leading thinkers are accessible to the larger community.

Clashes among researchers take place in every field. All too often, however, they remain private, creating an elite cognoscenti who “really know” what is going on, leaving the rest of the community far behind. Thus the most interesting conversations either happen between privileged individuals or not at all. The result is a spurious image of unification (the proverbial elephant in the living room), apparently uncritical acceptance of conflicting ideas, an uninformed public, and rather dull journals. To avoid critique and debate is to deprive the larger community of the greatest benefits of fine minds: their contribution to discernment into the heart of the issues.

As someone who deplores hidden religious agendas in any transpersonal field (Wade, 1999), I am particularly glad to see the subject out in the open, especially when it is debated by such esteemed scholars as Kenneth Ring and Michael Sabom in a respectful and professional manner. Although I found myself more in sympathy with Ring’s views and generally concur with his position, Sabom’s riposte was very effective. He made some excellent points, and cut away some of the thrust of Ring’s arguments, though Sabom appeared to be somewhat selective in

what he addressed. If anything, I was sorry not to see a rejoinder from Ring to Sabom's rebuttal, as is usual in such instances. I know from private conversations that he could have marshaled a staunch defense to at least some of Sabom's critique, but I understand Ring declined the opportunity to do so in advance. The larger NDE community is the loser for Ring's decision, but I hope others will further and deepen the conversation Ring and Sabom initiated.

I would also like to take this opportunity to underscore what I consider one of the most significant ideas emerging from this debate, which may be somewhat lost in the religious discussion: Ring's retraction of his earlier position that somehow a critical mass of altered-state experiences such as NDEs heralded the coming of a golden age of higher planetary consciousness. In our earliest professional correspondence, Ring and I debated this issue, and I urged him to make his new thinking public. Knowing it would be an unpopular stance in the NDE community, he was understandably reluctant. But another impediment was not having an appropriate forum in which to air such a change of mind. Years passed. Had this opportunity not arisen in the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, the public would have been deprived of a significant new direction taken by one of its most prominent and influential thinkers, perhaps forever.

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To the Editor:

For more than two decades, starting with the founding of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), it has been

fascinating for me to be associated with the foremost students of the near-death experience (NDE). I had been impressed that this subject continued to be challenging, with new perspectives and broadening views beyond the earliest reports of Raymond Moody (1975). The Summer 2000 issue of the *Journal* was startling in presenting what may be a serious controversy, with two of our most highly respected scholars confronting the religious implications of the NDE (Ring, 2000; Sabom, 2000). My careful reading of the entire issue leads me to inject my own reactions as an admitted member of a small minority Christian denomination with a unique qualification, the Swedenborgian church, based on Emanuel Swedenborg's voluminous descriptions of the life after death, based on "things heard and seen" in the spiritual world from 1745 to 1772.

Swedenborg's most extensive of all experiences clearly presaged descriptions by those who have "died and then recovered," and verified the astonishing accounts of many thousands of resuscitated experiencers who report being "separated" from their lifeless bodies, observing the mourners around the corpse, a transition into an indescribably beautiful realm, encountering those previously deceased and a "being of light," and other supernal incidents, before returning to awaken their empty bodies—and, above all, sensing a transformation resulting from their incredible adventure. It would be difficult to argue that these were not religious experiences. Then why the controversy?

At the risk of oversimplifying, the disagreement pits Kenneth Ring's concept of resuscitated experiencers asserting that they found themselves on "the road to Omega" against Michael Sabom's questioning whether this constitutes a glimpse into Heaven without meeting the qualifications set forth in his creed. Each wrote and published his interpretation, based on thoughtful research, but citing opinions subject to personal interpretation. Both adversaries have influenced those active in the field of exploring the higher level of consciousness.

The Swedenborgian view is unique in several aspects, and I would advance the teachings I accept as an inspired revelation simply because both Ring and Sabom are correct. I will confine my remarks to just five of the reasons why the interpretation of the NDE is open to personal points of view. Parenthetically, we should remember that, for the most part, although experiences have been recounted by those who have "been there," all of those narrators had *turned back* at the "barrier" they encountered, usually for a reason important for themselves.

First, Swedenborg has assured his followers that the Lord is meticulously careful in providing "welcoming spirits" who know how to welcome a new arrival in a way that will not be disturbing or overwhelming.

These welcoming spirits often accommodate themselves to the ideas in the dying person's mind about what to expect at the time of death. Thus, some experiencers assert that they saw a "being of light" beyond description, a representation of the infinite God who might be the judge of their earthly behavior. Others say that they clearly saw "Jesus Christ," based on artistic depictions or their own imaginations. Others say that they encountered "Mary," whose special role made her primary in their worship; while still others declare only that it was "a light, far brighter than any light on earth, but it did not hurt my eyes." This encounter, and other events, are generally harmonious with their beliefs, because only after a time of preparation will the new arrival at last be capable of grasping the realities of the spiritual world.

Second, despite heavenly scenery and beauty, or even the horrors of frightening NDEs, the near-death experiencer has not yet entered either Heaven or Hell. Swedenborgian teachings make clear that we humans are not yet capable of the adjustment to the final realms for which we were born. We will progress first through a series of preparatory steps accommodating us to a world without time or space, in which we are unable to lie or dissemble, where our inner natures can be brought out. There, if we are good folk, we can reject our false ideas and secret sins; or if we really prefer evil and perversion, we will freely choose a "downward path." After preparation, we will gravitate to that place in the afterlife in which we finally feel "at home."

Third, experiencers admit that they cannot accurately describe the spiritual world, any more than we can really tell someone about our dreams. The higher realm is not easily described, and often experiencers admit that, although their experience was valid, "not a dream but real," it is elusive when they try to write about it.

Fourth, all of our human languages are imperfect. Even our daily experiences are sometimes ineffable, and it is not easy for experiencers to explain to others how it was that they could fly, that things appeared or disappeared, and that they encountered other "beings," including long-deceased relatives.

And fifth, it is surprising to observe that after hearing literally hundreds of NDEs, that experience can be said to be "nondenominational" in that it just does not bear out our religious teachings. We cannot differentiate between the experiences of an atheist who died in an automobile accident and a devout Methodist undergoing a particularly risky abdominal operation. The experiences do not conform to preconceived notions about Heaven or Hell; the angelic beings we encounter have no halos, wings, or harps, just as the tormenting spirits have no

horns or pitchforks. We will join a wonderful “heavenly choir” only if on earth our special delight was rehearsing and performing marvelous ecclesiastical music. Do not expect ghostly or nebulous visions of otherworldly inhabitants. But most importantly, Swedenborg emphatically and repeatedly declared that the Lord does *not* throw anyone into Hell, baptized or not; for the truth is that He loves *all* His creatures, and only allows those to choose the alternative place who will be happier there than they could ever be in His true kingdom.

There is a great deal more that could be said, some of which I have written about previously (Rhodes, 1982, 1997) and lectured about, but I advance these ideas simply because I feel very strongly that misconceptions can profoundly becloud the controversy derived from the fine articles in the Journal. Yes, we will have differences of opinion and unlike interpretations. But be patient; we will all find out in due time. These observations are clearly not in agreement with what most churches teach about the life after death, which is why many experiencers say that they become more religious yet stop going to church, because conventional ideas about resurrection “just don’t make sense.”

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To the Editor:

The clash of the titans transpiring in the Summer 2000 Issue of the Journal (Ring, 2000; Sabom, 2000) begs for an impartial response. In the spirit of both essays, I want to say up front that in addition to being a researcher, I am a committed evangelical Christian. And beyond having

read Michael Sabom's most recent book, *Light & Death* (Sabom, 1998), I had an enjoyable conversation with him a while back about my own upcoming book. In addition, I have read and greatly enjoyed Kenneth Ring's work.

With that said, I feel like the person who said of the Middle East conflict, "Why can't the Jews and Arabs just sit down at the bargaining table like good Christians and work out their differences?" Unfortunately, like so many discussions involving God, the differences in perspective between Ring and Sabom regarding the near-death experience (NDE) are manifold. Furthermore, they have gone well beyond a scientific examination of the phenomenon to what the phenomenon means.

Therein lies the rub. Throughout the history of modern science, the hard sciences, such as physics, chemistry, and to a lesser extent biology, have sought to steer clear of discussing the meaning behind phenomena. The reason is clear: Not only is it irrelevant to an analysis of the effect, but there is no way to quantify meaning. For example, it is not necessary for a physicist to find and explain the meaning behind Dannion Brinkley's experience with a lightning bolt in order to discuss the phenomenon of lightning and its effect on human tissue.

This approach was foundational to the success of modern science. Beginning with Galileo, we found a way to pose "scientific questions" so that the researcher could avoid any exploration of a thing's meaning. In so doing, scientists were able to answer the question: "How does one discuss something for which there is no language?" By objectively quantifying phenomena, that is, by measuring them, scientists created a standardized language that made it possible to discuss findings. To this end, scientists created innumerable scales and units, such as degrees and volts, to measure effects under investigation.

As scientists attempting to discern the nature of the NDE, we are duty-bound to find a way to measure what we find. But in the case of NDEs, the particulars make it difficult. Fortunately, science is more than just a mechanical making of measurements; it is also a way of knowing. And to further that knowing, scientists and philosophers of science developed specific philosophies to guide their approach. By the time science had fully established itself as a superior way of ascertaining a fact, positivism, empiricism, materialism, reductionism, and determinism had formed its framework. Having a rule book kept arguments to a minimum. If there were sharp disagreements (and there certainly were), scientists could always boil them down to a matter of measurement.

Furthermore, in an attempt to augment and facilitate this approach, scientists, following Isaac Newton, began to develop scientific theories. To be scientific, a theory had to do three separate things. First, it had to explain the phenomenon; that is, break it down into its constituent parts. Second, it had to describe the activity; that is, detail the mechanism behind the phenomenon and how it was integrated into its milieu. And third and most importantly, a theory must predict; that is, it must accurately predict the future state of the thing under investigation.

These were the tests to establish a successful scientific theory. Generally, scientists were somewhat flexible on the first two criteria, because those factors are subject to constant refinement. But they were unyielding when it came to the third. If a theory could not predict, it was clear that the proponent did not have the goods. All scientific postulation was rigorously subjected to direct measurement, and if the numbers did not work out, the theory was tossed onto the trash heap of history.

But after Charles Darwin, things were never the same. Regardless of what one believes about Darwin, his writings forever confused the nature of scientific theories. We still talk of Darwin's theory of evolution today, and yet we know it predicts nothing beyond the tautology that things change. Many, like the noted philosopher of science Karl Popper (1972), maintained that Darwin's concept of evolution is not a theory at all, but a paradigm unto itself. Yet the question of who is right about Darwin is immaterial here. What is germane is that it was at that point in history that the rhetorical-argument-as-theory gradually began to supplant the process theory as a tool of scientists.

This trend was intensified with the coming of Sigmund Freud and his followers, and the advent of the so-called "soft sciences," those sciences where factual information can have a qualitative as well as a quantitative aspect. The principle reason for this is that the soft sciences study human habits. Yet problematically, individual humans are like subatomic particles in a quantum matrix. They generally follow certain "laws" of human nature in the aggregate, but they seem subject to a kind of Uncertainty Principle for People when on their own.

As a result, psychological "theories" dealing with and purporting to explain individual human behavior have proliferated. Some of our best psychological "theories" work a significant percentage of the time. But the days of Newtonian-like mathematical precision across the board in science are long past. Today, it is more relevant to speak in terms of *researchers' points of view* when it comes to their study of phenomena,

particularly human phenomena. Because psychologists' beliefs are now synonymous with their theories, some might say that today we have almost as many different psychological schools of thought as we have psychologists. This highlights a significant roadblock to scientific study of the mind. In fact, for this very reason, some researchers in the hard sciences maintain that human nature cannot actually be "scientifically" studied at all.

At one time, this was the finger "hard scientists" pointed at the soft sciences so that they could maintain their air of superiority as the true minions of science. But today that is no longer possible because hard scientists are as guilty as the soft scientists of muddying the waters of what science is, thanks largely to Albert Einstein. The fall-out from Einstein's three famous theories of reality led inexorably to the falsification of determinism, empiricism, materialism, reductionism, and positivism as infallible guideposts in the acquisition of scientific knowledge.

Moreover, thanks to Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, we now know that the ability to acquire any kind of factual knowledge about our reality is limited in principle; and we have been bouncing up against those limits for decades. The current conundrum with respect to scientific knowing always seems to bring forth a discussion of what Thomas Kuhn (1962) called a "paradigm shift." Today's paradigm shift within science is a direct result of the failure and/or limits of the above philosophies of science to permit the further acquisition of factual knowledge. This is a good thing for near-death researchers because it allows investigators to justify pushing the envelop, an act necessitated by the particulars of the case.

In the main, however, this paradigm shift has accelerated the aforementioned historical trend whereby rhetorical arguments continue to garner an ever larger share of scientific discourse. Today, almost everything in science is controversial. The further we get from direct measurement of phenomena, the more we resort to arguing. Yet arguing can be instructive; it is a time-tested, albeit annoying, method of arriving at reasonable conclusions.

At this point, therefore, it is instructive to ask: what are scientists really arguing about? The answer lies in the limits of the previous paradigm. Under the tenets of science outlined by the founding fathers of modern science, the animus for research rested on the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), which said in essence that every effect must have a reason behind it.

According to Princeton philosopher of science Diogenes Allen (1989), the findings of astrophysicists and astronomers resulting from

Einstein's General Theory of Relativity led scientists to begin asking PSR questions like "Why does the universe exist?" Such questions inevitably led directly to questions of meaning and purpose. Yet scientists managed to keep such questions bottled up until a single event forced them into the mainstream of scientific discourse.

In the fall of 1973, many of the world's most renowned astronomers, astrophysicists, and mathematicians, including Stephen Hawking, Roger Penrose, Robert Wagoner, Joseph Silk, and John Wheeler, gathered in Poland to mark Nicolaus Copernicus' 500th birthday. There a presentation by Cambridge cosmologist Brandon Carter entitled "Large Number Coincidences and the Anthropic Principle in Cosmology" (Carter, 1974) brought questions of meaning squarely into the open for the first time. Today, his Anthropic Principle, which states in essence that the universe was specifically crafted to foster life on earth, remains controversial, not because its precepts are untrue, but because it forces a discussion of meaning upon scientists who have taken great pains to eschew anything metaphysical. Allowing such questions to be asked, however, proved a boon for near-death research because it is almost impossible for investigators in this field to avoid them.

Mathematical physicist Paul Davies (1999) put the problem like this: If scientists were to analyze a neon sign based strictly on the traditional philosophies of science, we would get a complete breakdown of the component parts, as well as an explanation regarding their function and overall operation. No such materialist/reductionist analysis, however, is germane to the point of a neon sign, which is to transmit information, a decidedly nonmaterial thing. The point of the sign is not to give the parts something to do; *it is to foster meaning*. As such, no analysis of the sign can be complete unless it addresses the meaning precipitated by the sign's information content.

And this brings us directly to the argument between Ring and Sabom. Even if we could measure an NDE as we measure lightning bolts, the analysis would still not be complete because this experience suggests a profound meaning beyond the mechanistic details of the event. Characteristically, the most significant series of events in our lifetime poses limitations upon scientific investigators that may be unparalleled in the annals of science. It is impossible to draw a line as to where it begins and where it ends, almost as if the *measurement problem* of quantum mechanics has a new iteration in the interface between biology, medicine, physiology, and psychology.

In my view, however, we do not need to verify thousands of separate instances of NDEs to show that they what they purport to be: in Melvin

Morse's words, "the best objective evidence of what it is like to die" (1996, p. 309). If researchers can show scientifically that *in even one instance* people leave their bodies as the body dies and proceed to another realm where they meet beings with capabilities and knowledge far beyond our own, then the phenomenon is established.

From that point on, like the neon sign, its meaning far exceeds any discussion, no matter how deep, of the parts. Unfortunately, the process of deriving and attaching meanings to the NDE is inherently fraught with argument. The nature of meaning is our oldest and perhaps most difficult argument. Yet if scientists are going to weigh in on this discussion they need hard facts. We have to save the speculation for others. For obvious reasons, however, we are stymied as investigators when it comes to gathering otherworldly facts on the NDE. And even when we finally do get to see a few of the pieces in what could conceivably be an infinitely large jigsaw puzzle, we are confronted with Winston Churchill's riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma all over again.

Therefore, interpretation is the order of the day. The qualitative assessment demands that researchers bring all that they are and all that they know to bear upon the analysis. Consequently, the conflicting views of reality offered by Ring and Sabom are a product of not only who and what they are, but what they *believe*. These are very difficult arguments to win or lose because beliefs are arrived at emotionally and therefore do not generally succumb to reason. Fortunately, in this case, it is not necessary to prove either wrong; it is entirely possible that Ring and Sabom are both correct.

Personally, I sympathize with Sabom regarding the direction of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS). I was aghast when I read an article in IANDS' newsletter, *Vital Signs*, by a woman who was trying to use her out-of-body experience to justify her homosexuality as a blessing from God (Breaux, 1998). Such miscues demonstrate an inappropriate political agenda on the part of the editorial staff, and this kind of thing is increasingly becoming the norm. Moreover, for many, near-death studies appear more literary genre than scientific pursuit. As such, it is sometimes difficult to tell where hard science ends and New Age trendiness begins.

On the other hand, if God is perfect, ultimate truths cannot be dichotomous, since duplicity would be an imperfection. True facts are incontrovertible statements. Why should Christians fear truth, even if it is somewhat uncomfortable? By definition, we only seek The Way, The Truth, and The Light; yet we are notorious for bickering endlessly

amongst ourselves over every little thing. Christendom has 243 different denominations, and it is almost impossible to find a single belief they all have in common. One man's heresy is another man's dogma. This is precisely why the early church was forced to embrace creeds to solidify the mainstream of Christian thought.

As such, when Sabom referred to the notion that NDEs could be a deceptive move by the devil in a larger spiritual context, he was absolutely right: they *could* be. But at this point it is simply an unproven allegation with no basis in fact. Biblically, questions of evil and specifically *the problem of evil* are wide-ranging and remain generally unresolved. And if we invoke Occam's Razor (the Law of Parsimony), which states in essence that it is illogical in solving dilemmas to allude to factors beyond the bare minimum required to solve the problem, we can say that the NDE is explainable without allusion to the devil.

But here again is another rub. If the NDE is truly a close encounter with God or somebody like Him, we are witnessing, in my opinion, the greatest series of events since those in Palestine 2000 years ago. And with both atheists and infidels now claiming to have near-death experiences, it would seem that God's reach extends beyond the walls of Christendom.

If we merely take the best that both Ring and Sabom have to offer, we are far better off than we started. Together, their work offers clear, demonstrable, scientific evidence that the NDE is a phenomenon that ranges well beyond the bounds of brain chemistry. Sabom's Atlanta work and Ring's work with the congenitally blind were both groundbreaking to the point of causing earthquakes in science. The big question they leave us with, however, is this: Should they, in their role as research scientists, be telling us just what the NDE means?

In the old paradigm, the answer was clearly "no," but the new paradigm is a different story. Being centered on all four of Aristotle's causes, rather than just agency, the new scientific paradigm recognizes the existence of meaning and purpose. A belief exists that the emerging paradigm will eventually be distilled into a holistic way of gathering facts that encompasses all three of mankind's methods of knowing: *scientific knowing* based on systematic replication, *philosophic knowing* based on reason and logic, and *theological knowing* based on Søren Kierkegaard's sense of inward subjectivity. All three have their limitations, but together they form a powerful way of knowing a fact.

And if we look at the stages of an NDE in light of these three, some basic truths become evident. First, it is apparent that we do in fact have a soul. Second, there is life after death and we will be held accountable for

our conduct here on earth. Third, that phenomena (beings) exist beyond this realm of time and space that play an active role in our endeavors. And fourth, whether the NDE is from God (as I believe) or from Satan, we are enmeshed in a spiritual battle wherein we are implored to foster Godliness at every turn during our stay here on the planet. These are extrapolated truths from information uncovered during wide-ranging near-death studies. As such they offer a basis for common ground that all can live with to our mutual benefit.

All of this brings us full circle. Arguments will continue about the nature and scope of the NDE, as well they should. For people who seek oneness with God, they offer a profound glimpse at the meaning and purpose behind our existence. And if we can use Jesus' words to frame the context within which these arguments will transpire, I would choose these: "You shall know them by their fruits." This is a cosmic law: The fruits we manifest are indeed an indication of the reality to which we accede. So the question is, "What kinds of fruits do near-death experiencers produce?" Answering this question will give us some indication as to whether the phenomenon is a good thing or a bad thing.

This leads me to one final question: If the Jews and Arabs do sit down at the table and work out their differences like good Christians, can we all agree that in the final analysis we are all talking about the very same God? I do not know, but I am dying to find out.

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To the Editor:

I have spent as little as 10 minutes and as much as hours on issues of the *Journal* in the past 10 years after stepping down from being an active board member of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) and an active near-death researcher. The Summer 2000 issue was the first that left me spellbound. How brave and honest of the *Journal* to publish the conflictual material between Kenneth Ring (2000) and Michael Sabom (2000)! I guess I can be considered one of Ring's colleagues and students because I was a near-death experiencer featured prominently in Ring's *Heading Toward Omega* (Ring, 1984); but how disappointing to be typecast as I was by Sabom. At the time Ring interviewed me for his book, I was not a member of IANDS, had not even seen his previous book, and did not know his "party line," nor had I read books by anyone else associated with IANDS. I was not interviewed casually at Ring's "Near-Death Hotel," but was tape-recorded on two consecutive afternoons in Ring's office at the University of Connecticut Graduate Center.

I loved reading Ring's accounts of "the good old days," having been the first active female member of the IANDS Board of Directors, from 1983 to 1990, after breaking open the "good old boy network." I worried about IANDS when I left in 1990, but seven years was enough for me and I needed to move on or burn up and burn out from the projections many of us have about what the near-death experience means to us and to the people who have them.

When I read this issue of the *Journal* containing Ring's and Sabom's articles, my first impression was that everything I had worried about happening to my cherished IANDS was happening. Then I realized that we all still have egos and they were at play. The editor has done a wonderful job of keeping the *Journal* balanced, and I am pleased that

he made room for researchers the caliber of Ring and Sabom to have their say and thankful that all this is being said because, while we get caught up in brand names, the NDE is generic. We need to remember that and bless the NDE for what it is: a direct communication from a power greater than ourselves that does not want it limited to the religions that limit us as humans.

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