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**LOVE AND DEATH:  
 The Relationship between Altered-State Sex and Near-Death  
 Experiences**

Jenny Wade, PhD

*If I must die, I will encounter darkness as a bride,  
 and hug it in mine arms.*

– William Shakespeare  
*Measure for Measure, Act iii, Ac. 1*

**Abstract:**

This paper presents the findings of the first study of adventitious, non-ordinary altered states that occur during sex and compares their phenomenology and results to those of near-death experiences (NDEs). Sex, in the absence of psychotropic drugs or esoteric or meditational techniques designed to bring about altered states of consciousness, can trigger a wide variety of altered states, most of which resemble those considered in various traditions to be signs of spiritual attainment. Kundalini, out-of-body experiences, telepathy, and various experiences of the Light, including *unio mystica*, are found in sex as well as in NDEs. The transformative effects of these sexual experiences closely parallel those of NDEs, including increased spirituality, personal growth, psi (psychic) experiences, improved relationships, and changed beliefs about the nature of reality, among others. The fact that sex can bring about such powerful changes suggests the need to reconsider what NDEs and contemplative altered states represent.

Sacred sex is a venerable spiritual path despite its long decline as an open practice with the rise of civilization – societies characterized by city-states and bureaucratic institutions rather than tribal- and clan-oriented societies. Originally – and as still may be detected in the relicts of tribal- or clan-based cultures – sex was recognized as a potential gateway to certain non-ordinary phenomena available to adults, associated with spirituality.

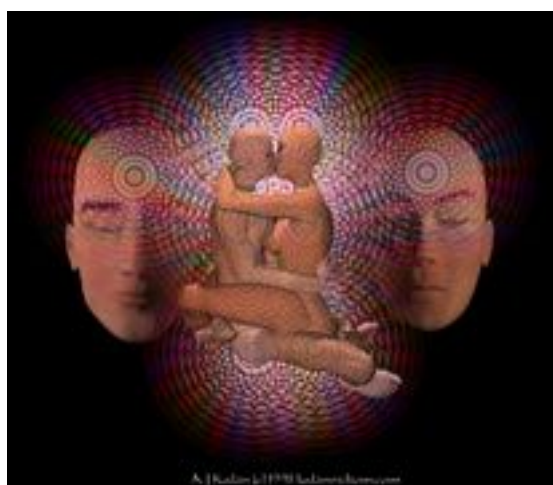
The increasing institutionalization of religion has led to:

1. the specialization and stratification of social roles assigning spiritual authority to an elite class (priests, oracles, initiates, etc.);
  2. the codifying of spiritual norms under the control of the elite classes (the transformation of taboos into legal systems with fixed penalties, such as the Hebraic laws of the Old Testament);
- and

### 3. increasing regulation and restriction of direct personal participation in the sacred.

In Eastern as well as Western traditions, the direct spiritual experience of individuals has been discouraged outside of set forms and practices controlled by religious authorities - who alone may sanction any person's experience as legitimate. The hegemony of the religious establishment today in evaluating the legitimacy of the "lay person's" personal spiritual experiences is a fact of life few would question – fewer still, if scientism is recognized as a contrarian establishment also passing on the legitimacy of spiritual experiences.

Unquestionably, much of the resistance to NDEs as legitimate spiritual events comes from the need for these establishments to maintain their authority in propounding their own metaphysics and worldview (Armstrong, 1993; Berger and Luckmann, 1980; Pagels, 1981, 1988; Peacock and Kirsch, 1973) – and this resistance has similarly obscured the prevalence of transcendent sex.



Artwork by Andy Kalin

A significant number of adults (conservatively, probably one in 17 or 18; see Laski, 1961; Maslow, 1987; Scantling, 1990; Scantling and Browder, 1993) experience spontaneous personal revelations of a vaster reality during sex, that is, without the influence of psychotropic drugs or employing esoteric sexual arts, such as Tantra, designed to create an altered state. When those who deliberately cultivate such states are included, the numbers are much higher. Lovers may have profound spiritual experiences, but the fear of social and religious stigma has kept the vast majority of them silent (Laski, 1961; Maurer, 1994; Maslow, 1987; Wade, 2001, 2000a, 2000b, 1998). This secret underground parallels that of NDEs prior to the seminal publications by

Raymond Moody (1975, 1977) and Kenneth Ring (1980, 1984) that disseminated knowledge of NDEs popularly and legitimized them.

NDEs are probably the most documented adventitious non-ordinary experiences today, and the best researched. Though closely related to NDEs, deathbed visions (Osis and Haraldson, 1977) and bereavement apparitions (Vargas et al 1989) are other widely reported adventitious altered states that include spiritual experiences, but these have not been as extensively studied. Abduction experiences, while achieving a certain notoriety and attracting some serious study, are not as universally productive of the spiritual interpretation accorded to NDEs (Ring, 1992). For one thing, the abduction and NDE experiences are phenomenologically distinct, leading to different interpretations. For another, until now, the spiritual interpretation of NDE phenomenology has arguably been attributed to the existential crisis represented by death and to cultural conditioning and religious beliefs concerning an afterlife (Kellehear, 2001, 1996; Knoblauch, Schmied and Schnettler, 2001; Murphy, 2001; Zaleski, 1987). Another argument supporting a spiritual interpretation of NDEs concerns their positively transformative effects (Flynn, 1986; Grey, 1985; Musgrave, 1997; Ring, 1980, 1984; Sutherland, 1992; Tiberi, 1993), especially as compared to abduction experiences, which may or may not promote a

similar change in values. Ring (1992) advances the argument that the effects are similar, but even in his sympathetic research, there are notable differences between the results of abduction experiences and NDEs.

Spontaneous, non-volitional sexual altered states occur during conditions notably lacking the existential issues associated with NDEs – and are often completely at odds with religious beliefs about holiness. Yet some produce similar experiences to NDEs, most evoke spiritual interpretations, and virtually all of them yield the same kinds of positive transformation as NDEs. The fact that sex can replicate the transformative effects of NDEs tends to affirm the positive interpretation of both types of experience. Though it can “prove” nothing about their spiritual validity in any objective way, it also detracts from the prominent status NDEs have enjoyed to this point as unique adventitious openings to “spiritual” realities and catalytic insights.

This paper provides an overview of the first phenomenological study charting the range of transcendent sexual experiences, highlights their similarities to the structure and content of NDEs, and compares their reported aftereffects.

### **A brief history of sacred sex**

Although full treatment of the history of sacred sex cannot be presented here, suffice it to say that the association of sex with spirituality and transformation is nothing new (Brown, 1988; Coakley, 1997; Faure, 1998; Parrinder, 1996; Tannahill, 1980; Weisner-Hanks, 2000). Sex is one of the first attributes associated with deity, and among the earliest recorded creation myths are stories in which the Creator forms the two sexes out of his or her own hermaphroditic body. Examples include Ymir, in Norse mythology; the giant from whose body the cosmos, gods and humans were made, T'ai Yuan, the Great Original of the Chinese who combined the principles of masculinity and femininity in her being and arranged the workings of the universe according to these principles; and the first version of creation in the Bible, in which God is represented as encompassing male and female principles and blessing their sexual union (Genesis 1:27-8). The enduring importance of sex in religion is still easily discernible in the yoni and lingam, yin and yang, and the mystical unions of Jesus as the bridegroom of the church, of Shekinah and spiritual aspirants in the Kabbalah, and between Allah and spiritual seekers in certain mystical Islamic sects, to name only a few.

That these expressions are not merely metaphors for abstract metaphysical concepts is apparent from what little is known of the fertility rites and sexual mystery schools of the ancient world, including the cults of Isis, Ishtar, Bacchus, Serapis, Priapus, Dumuzi, Inanna, Ceres, Venus, Aphrodite, Fortuna Virilis, Pan, Dionysis, Liber, Cybele, the Baalim, and Mithras in Western European history (Carr, 2003; Partridge, 1960; Roberts, 1993; Tannahill, 1980; Young, 1964). The oldest known human document, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, first recorded about 3,000 years ago -in Mesopotamia from a much older oral source about an eponymous historical king of Uruk who lived about 2700 BCE, contains an explicit account of transformational sacred sex. At the command of a goddess, a high-ranking sex priestess seeks out Enkidu, a bestial subhuman who ranges in the wilderness, grazing alongside other animals. She arouses his lust, and the two enjoy a week-long sex binge. When Enkidu pulls himself together afterward, he first notices that the other animals now shy away from him. He then “drew himself up [walks upright?], for his understanding had broadened,” and the priestess announces, “You are beautiful, Enkidu, you are become like a god” (Kovacs, 1989, tablet 1, 9, 184-188). Through sex, Enkidu has evolved and become one-third divine.

The belief that lovemaking can involve humans directly in personal and cosmic spiritual transformation still exists today. Despite the asceticism, celibacy and other restrictions on lovemaking for spiritual seekers and laity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all also have branches that recognize sex as a path to realization. Tantra is perhaps the best known (although most Tantric forms familiar to Westerners are fairly corrupted). Vajrayana Buddhism, which incorporates elements of ancient Tibetan and Indian indigenous religions, combines sexual and meditation practices. Broadly speaking, within these traditions, human lovemaking represents one level of the existence of the individual soul in the World Soul (Atman) and the presence of nirvana in the world of life and death. Taoism advocates sex as the path to health, cosmic harmony, and immortality.

As for the religions of the Bible, Jews are expected to enjoy sex regularly as a blessed responsibility of conjugal life, and sex on the Sabbath certainly is not considered work to be avoided but a sacred duty. It is also a way of participating in the divine male and female forces sustaining the universe. This is especially true in mystical Judaism, where Kabbalistic texts with explicit sexual imagery, such as the *Zohar* and *The Book of Splendor*, are supported by a tradition affirming marital sex as one of the most powerful spiritual practices for transformation (Ariel, 1988; Hoffman, 1992; Schacter-Shalomi, 1991; Scholem, 1974). The Jewish Pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls, Gnostic gospels and Christian Apocrypha all present a divine sexual couple with Sophia as the feminine counterpart of God. Saints like Teresa of Avila were known for their lover-like yearning for union with God, including orgasmic altered states (Laski, 1961).

Sexuality is not only consecrated in the Qu'ran, but Mohammed's extraordinary virility was considered a sign of his spiritual realization. Mystical forms of Islam frequently liken the relationship between the seeker and spiritual guide, between Allah and Mohammed, and between Allah and the seeker to the love between a man and a woman "whose body is the temple of Allah and within whom is the unwritten Qu'ran" (McDaniel, 1989, p. 164). Ali Rajah, a Baul mystic, maintained that ritual spiritual practice could not be performed without a woman.

Over time, however, the establishment versions of all these religions came to view the body, especially sensual pleasure, as a potential distraction from the spiritual path which was regarded as increasingly mental and noncorporeal. The distance between a distraction and a hazard was but a short step. Today, most Eastern religions are characterized by well developed ascetic and monastic expectations for spiritual attainment, as well as high levels of bodily regulation during sex for the average householder (Collins, 1997; Faure, 1998; Kripal, 2002; Eskildsen, 1998; Tannahill, 1980; van Gulik, 1974; Williams, 1997). This is also true of Western religions (Parrinder, 1996; Schimmel, 1997; Tannahill, 1980; Weisner-Hanks, 2000; Brown, 1988). Even Judaism, which has retained the broadest consecration of sex, today restricts its frequency and advises against its prolongation for pleasure (Schacter-Shalomi, 1991).

With the exception of "Westernized" versions of Tantra or Taoist sex marketed as paths to more and better orgasms or ways to enhance relationships, the vast majority of sexual spiritual practices are largely unknown to the general public. Most are restricted to initiates with high levels of attainment in spiritual practices, and many still derive from arcane oral traditions. As a result, the notion of "sacred sex" has little meaning in contemporary Western society – except that spiritually transformative lovemaking keeps popping up in studies of any size concerning - either -sex (Maurer, 1994; Scantling and Browder, 1993) or adventitious altered states (Laski, 1961; Maslow, 1987). The study outlined below is the first to investigate the phenomenology of these ubiquitous transcendent experiences.

### **An exploratory study of altered-state sex**

A recent study (Wade, in press; Wade, 2000b) was designed to identify the quality and range of adventitious altered states occurring during sex using a combination of heuristic and phenomenological inquiry. The sample consisted of self-identified males and females of any sexual preference who said that they had had a “non-ordinary, altered-state, mystical, or transcendent experience within the context of lovemaking or sex with a partner” during a time when they were not using psychotropic drugs or engaging in Tantric, Taoist or similar erotic techniques designed to produce an altered state. Some of these experiences started before penetration began, others started just afterwards. The study did not define sex as occurring during penetration (meaningless anyway considering the lesbians in the sample). In some cases penetration never took place, even among heterosexual partners.

These subjects were solicited by word-of-mouth and referral through professional venues at institutions of higher learning.

Narrative records were obtained from 91 men and women aged 24-70 that met the clinical and noetic parameters for alterations in the standard perceptions of time, space, and agency that represent consensus reality in Euro-American culture. They were analyzed using a heuristic phenomenological approach, and the results were integrated into exhaustive descriptions that were then synthesized into fundamental structure, content, and meaning areas. Once the data became clearer, they were compared to phenomenological descriptions in the altered-state literature. Since details of this study have been reported elsewhere (Wade, in press, 2000b), only those elements relevant to NDE studies are reported here.

Forty-two (46%) had been brought up Protestant; 22 (24%), Roman Catholic; 18 (20%), agnostic or atheist beliefs; and 7 (8%), Jewish. One person each (1%) had a background that was Buddhist and “eclectic,” respectively. As adults, most had shifted their spiritual orientation – some as a direct result of their non-ordinary sexual experiences, even if this took several years – to follow less traditional paths, a finding that may mirror sociological trends but is also consistent with research on NDErs. Forty-three (47%) now consider themselves to be spiritual but to have an “eclectic” orientation. Only 16 (18%) are Christian. Thirteen (14%) consider themselves atheist or agnostic, though 6 of these used theistic references throughout their narratives in describing their experiences, and another 3 talked of spiritual meanings or causes for their episodes. Eight (9%) are Buddhist; 4 (5%) Hindu/Yogic; 3 (3%) Pagan/Nature mysticism; and 1 (1%) each follow Islamic, “New Age,” “Jewish mysticism” and Transcendental Meditation paths, respectively.

Just as with near-death experiences, demographic factors – sex, age, sexual preference, race, profession, etc. – had little or no bearing on the kind of sexual experiences reported. Nor did spiritual beliefs or practice. Non-Christians felt the “presence of the Holy Ghost,” long-term Buddhist meditators had kundalini effects, agnostics who had never meditated had *kensho* experiences of the Void. However, spiritual affiliation did change, in many cases as a result of the sexual experiences, though it was often not possible to isolate transcendent sex as the single or primary factor. The vast majority of the sample had mainstream Judeo-Christian backgrounds, many of them sexually repressive.

The frequency with which people stand a chance of experiencing transcendent events during sex, a very common experience, greatly exceeds the frequency of NDEs, which occur as isolated experiences, only occasionally repeated in relatively few people’s lives. Seventeen (19%) had had a single experience in a lifetime of sex. Like NDEs, these events were often recalled vividly even after 20 or even 30 years had elapsed. In increasing order of frequency of the events, 16 (18%) had had altered-state sex on a few occasions. The largest proportion,

29 (32%) typically experienced transcendent sex within the context of a single relationship, followed by 15 people (16%) who were able to invite the experience successfully, regardless of partners, with some degree of frequency. Seven (8%) enjoyed transcendent sex with some regularity in multiple relationships. Another seven rarely have “ordinary sex” (and do not enjoy it).

By definition, these sexual experiences were characterized by participation in an altered state that could not be ascribed to the use of chemicals or deliberate techniques. The ordinary sense of time, space, and/or agency was disrupted and transformed. Typically sexual altered states included an awareness of the lover, if only as a conduit, and were rooted in the union of the two whether or not actual intercourse occurred. The partner need not have been human, although there must have been a sufficient sense of a living presence that the participant did not construe the event as a solitary, autoerotic experience.

Sexual altered states are more or less independent of orgasm, which is considered a discrete state of its own. Men and most women entered an altered state that had no relationship to the timing or duration of their climax. For some women, however, orgasm was almost constant (chaining, multiple climaxes), although the transcendent events they described had little or no (subjectively) discernible relationship to orgasm. Orgasm was either a non-event, or could be a nuisance, a distraction - a problem that shatters or ends the much deeper altered state altogether.

Another factor that differentiates transcendent sex is the felt experience of a cosmic force engaging one or both lovers in the context of their lovemaking. The tendency to associate such experiences with the supernatural was marked. This cosmic force is most often described in the terms reserved for Spirit – God, the Divine, the Oversoul, the Void, etc. – but it was also described spatially, as a place of cosmic power, intelligence, and love or as an implicit power that makes the other realms possible, or causes non-ordinary events in consensus reality.

It is beyond the scope of this article to dwell on the complete range of altered-state experiences that occur during transcendent sex (Wade, in press, 2000b). Only those with the most direct parallels to near-death phenomenology are discussed below. However, the full range includes, in order of descending frequency of occurrence: merging with the partner (43; 47%); kundalini (31; 34%); the Third Presence (27; 30%); past lives awareness (20; 22%); out-of-body experiences (23; 25%); becoming one with nature (17; 19%); visions (13; 14%); clairsentience (13; 14%); *unio mystica* (11; 12%); the Void (9; 10%); shapeshifting (9; 10%); channeling (8; 9%); transports (7; 8%); magical connections to nature (7; 8%); *trespasso* (6; 7%); and deity possession (5; 6%). Of these, kundalini, visions, out-of-body experiences, telepathy, and *unio mystica* are the most similar to phenomenology reported in NDEs.

Other phenomena share some commonality with NDEs but remain too distinct for comparison. Prominent among these is the memory of past lives, in which lovers were transported back in time and space as other individuals who could “see” or feel themselves moving through scenes belonging to previous eras and different locations with a fairly complete knowledge of the biography of the past-life personality. Although past lives condensed an entire lifetime to a few scenes that clearly highlighted an individual’s tragic flaws and the way they played out in relationship, these experiences were quite different from the holographic sense of time compression flashing through a person’s own, recognizable life events with personal awareness of the effect of the actions on all parties involved reported in NDEs (Ring and Valerino, 1998).

Another category of experience with some resemblance to NDEs is what I term *clairsentience*. In lovemaking, clairsentience refers to a sudden preternatural knowledge of “the truth,” but this truth is typically limited to subtle, complex, previously hidden dynamics of the lovers’ relationship – not the omniscience sometimes reported by NDErs in which the secrets of the universe are revealed.

Finally, in *transports*, lovers describe spatial dislocation to idealized worlds usually unavailable to humans (underwater realms, the microcosm, the sky, idealized cityscapes, and outer space), but these environments never were described in terms of the idealized pastoral or urban landscapes reported in the near-death realms of light. Instead they seemed to retain a recognizably quality as normally unfathomable outer reaches of this world rather than another dimension or order of existence.

### **The Energy of Life and Death**

In Eastern religions, the life energy that animates all organic matter is considered a sacred force emanating from Spirit (however understood). This life energy is known by many names: *shakti* in yogic traditions; *chi* and *huo* in Taoism and related schools; *tumo* in traditions with indigenous Tibetan roots, etc.

Western religions and esoteric societies also recognize this energy by a variety of names. Yoga concerns the awakening of this energy, traditionally depicted as a Snake Goddess named Kundalini coiled at the base of the spine, and teaches to actualize its potentials through increasingly subtle levels until the ultimate spiritual realization (popularly enlightenment, *samadhi*) is attained. The works of Gopi Krishna, widely available in the United States since the 1970s (1971, 1972a,b, 1974, 1975) made the yogic tradition describing this energy as kundalini a relatively well-recognized phenomenon in the West. Titles like *Kundalini: Evolutionary Energy in Man* and *The Biological basis of Religion and Genius* indicate the vast powers attributed to this force, including creativity, sex and procreation, health, vitality, longevity, inspiration (literally and figuratively), genius, transformation, and also, of course, life itself.

Tantric yoga, a countercultural religious movement based on “reverse spirituality,” employed “opposite-perverse” practices to reach enlightenment in the Eastern crazy-wisdom tradition (Tannahill, 1980; McDaniel, 1989). Instead of ascetic practices, dietary taboos, and sexual abstinence, deliberately sensual techniques, including the eating and drinking of forbidden substances, and cultivation of bodily pleasures, especially sex, became the spiritual path in Tantra. Libidinal energy is cultivated through sexual practices that raise kundalini through higher and subtler energy vortices (chakras) and meridians in the body until the individual’s life energy completes an unencumbered circuit with the cosmic life force of the Oversoul (Brahmin-Atman). Krishna’s modern theory of kundalini (1971, 1972a, b, 1974, 1975) is congruent with traditional sources identifying the sex organs and parts of the nervous system as the physiological repository for kundalini.

Awakening this powerful life force is a risky business because it can seriously destabilize one’s psychological equilibrium, so yogic traditions stress carefully supervised cultivation of kundalini states, but a significant number of Westerners, experimenting with a smorgasbord of esoteric and spiritual practices since the 1960s and 1970s, are believed to have accidentally activated kundalini, often with such disturbingly non-ordinary percepts and so little preparation that they have been considered psychotic (Adler, 1995; Sannella, 1981, 1989; Grof and Grof, 1989; Greyson, 1993b). It is these unusual percepts (rather than the larger experiences attributed to kundalini) that are defined as a distinct altered-state category in the sexual study.

In the present study, kundalini was defined as the non-ordinary percepts of energy fields, especially sensations of heat, subtle force fields, light, and liquefaction, in the absence of any discernible stimulus (congruent with descriptions in various spiritual traditions). According to this definition, kundalini experiences occurred in the here-and-now without significant alteration in the usual sense of self. They were sometimes accompanied by involuntary movements (*mudras* and *kriyas*), copious female ejaculate (*amrita*), and glossolalia – all signifying some degree of realization in different religions – but, with the exception of glossolalia, unknown to the study participants who tended to describe them in naïve ways.

In addition to the close association of kundalini with the life force, especially sex, it has also been associated with death (Radha, 1985; Krishna, 1975), especially through its unskilled awakening and the potentially dangerous conditions it can create. Greyson (1993) conducted the first study of the relationship between NDEs and physiological kundalini effects – pursuing Ring's lead (1984) and following speculation by other writers that NDEs activate kundalini (first as the body's attempt to remain alive and then a way for the life force to escape its confines). Greyson's research (1993, p 287) indicates that NDErs, in comparison to controls, are more likely to exhibit some of the conditions associated with kundalini activity, including: assuming strange postures, becoming locked into a physical position, experiencing alterations in breathing, having spontaneous orgasmic sensations, experiencing a progression of sensations ascending up the body, feeling unexplained heat or cold in the body, hearing internal noises, having a sudden positive emotion for no discernible reason, seeing the self as if from a distance, and experiencing unexplained changes in thought processes.

Lovers in the sex survey reported *mudras* and *kriyas* similar to the postures reported in Greyson's study, as well as ascending progressions of sensation, increased body heat and bliss. Since they were already engaged in sex, orgasm was not an out-of-context event for them. Out-of-body sensations are considered below.

Greyson also reported three items rare among NDErs and controls that did not differentiate the two groups but that were quite common among participants in the sex study: noticeably high body heat, perceptions of internal lights or colors, and lights emanating from inside that were bright enough to illuminate a dark room (p. 287).

Ring's (1984) speculations, Greyson's research (1993a), and various classic kundalini sources were developed by Yvonne Kason (1994) into a theory that at the time of death, kundalini energy awakens, rises to the crown chakra (an energy center located at or above the crown of the head), and moves the spirit out of the body. According to this thinking, such a kundalini awakening is responsible for many of the perceptions during NDEs, including experiences of light, expanded consciousness, mystical experiences, etc. Morse (Morse and Perry, 1992) and Kason (1994) speculate that NDErs who see the Light, indicating a relatively higher level of kundalini arousal, are unable to shut this energy down completely afterwards, permitting residual openings and effects, including greater degrees of personal transformation.

Since seeing bright lights is characteristic of sexually-induced kundalini experiences in the study (and of course with the rechanneling of sexual energy upwards in the body in traditional Tantra), it would be reasonable to expect that even adventitious kundalini arousal during sex would produce transformation, and perhaps lead to other non-ordinary phenomena. Indeed, it seems to do both. However it is not true that kundalini perceptions preceded other non-ordinary events, such as visions, transports, etc. Moreover experiences of light could vary considerably, as discussed below. Kundalini "indicators" as identified by Ring and Greyson correspond to those in the sex research. Their relationship to other non-ordinary phenomena,



such as mystical visions, is not clear in either NDE or transcendent sex experiences.

### **“Little death” and Near-Death similarities**

Of the other altered-state phenomena produced during sex, those having the most direct parallels to the phenomena reported during NDEs include: OBEs (especially those with telepathy), visions of other beings, the experience of the Light approaching and *unio mystica*

In sexual OBEs, subjects maintained an intact sense of ego in the here-and-now but experienced the personal sense of agency leaving the spatial confines of the body, which was still identified as part of the self. Ego was experienced continuously, without any break at the time of dislocation so that lovers were startled to find themselves outside their bodies. Displacement lacked a sense of locomotion and was discerned through a realistic change in visual vantage point to a location outside, and usually above the body. Imagery was not merely realistic but often extremely sharp and clear. OBEs sometimes featured telepathic awareness of the partner's unspoken thoughts and feelings. There was virtually no difference between sexual OBEs and those reported in the NDE literature.

Like near-death OBEs, sexual OBEs were usually accompanied by euphoria. This is an extremely important finding for two reasons. First, in NDEs, the euphoria could arguably be attributed to escaping the pain and malaise of a dying body, which is not true during sex. This suggests that OBEs by their very nature may be blissful (Gabbard and Twemlow, 1984). Second, previously most reports of sexual OBEs came from the trauma literature, and were attributed to dissociation. It is common for people who have been raped as adults or children to dissociate during sex in an attempt to escape horrific events happening to the body or, retrospectively, to keep the ego intact by distancing from memories that evoke the original trauma. Such dysphoric dissociation is a clinical commonplace.

In this study, all respondents were engaged in consensual sex. (The sample included people with histories of sexual abuse, but none reported OBEs during the abuse. In fact, during their transcendent sexual experiences, they were surprised by their ability to remain in their bodies and in the present.) While it might be possible to argue that the intensity of the orgasms reported during these mostly post-coital OBEs was somehow threatening to the ego, the fact remains that the OBEs were subsequent to orgasm and neither fear nor a sense of being overwhelmed was reported. It may very well be that the adventitious OBEs of sex and NDEs are both quite distinct from dissociation and depersonalization. This view was advanced early in the NDE literature by Ring (1980, 1984).

In a typical case from the sex study, a man who was the middle-aged director of a non-profit organization who had been reared in a traditional Jewish household, reported an incident that had occurred when he was in college. He had never had a non-ordinary experience, nor was he a believer in them. His worldview changed significantly as a result of his experience:

It was an extraordinary sexual encounter, and immediately afterwards I suddenly found myself having for the first time what I would call a transcendent kind of experience. I was out of my body, observing me and my lover lying in bed from above, perhaps near the ceiling. I'd never heard of such a thing and didn't know how to explain it, but it was a very strange phenomenon suddenly looking down at the two of us.

I wasn't upset. I was in a state of euphoria. I moved from feeling a sense of ecstasy and connection to that person, to the experience itself, and gradually to a calm curiosity about what was happening....

I really didn't know what to make of it. In later years, I was able to hear other people put into language what I'd experienced when they talked of out-of-body experiences. It affirmed what I had gone through...

It did establish an openness in me to the possibility that we are really not our bodies, that we have abilities beyond our bodies, that reality might be different from what I believed about the physical world. I became more open to exploring those greater possibilities.

Most lovers, like NDErs, are disoriented, not exactly knowing what happened or how, though it seems much easier for the lovers to look back and recognize their own bodies. Terry, a writer who lives in the South, says:

I thought, "I'm going to rise up" in the usual sense that my *body* is going to do that. And then the next thing I was aware of, I really was about two or three feet up off the bed and looking at me. It was as if my *brain* was rising up, and what I was seeing was my body and my partner on the bed. It was weird, really weird.

Just as some NDErs become frightened and want to try to get back into their bodies, so some lovers are afraid. Sandra, a devout Roman Catholic, actually thought the intensity of her orgasm had turned from a little death into actual death when found herself rising above her body:

I was initially a little frightened because I didn't know. My God, am I *dying*? Am I floating up to heaven? I was panicking a little. But then I could see my body, that I was breathing and that everything was fine, that my boyfriend was holding me. So okay, I'm not dying, but in the back of my mind I was still thinking why am I up *here*?

Likewise, Alice panicked because her only knowledge of OBEs was from reading about NDEs, which made her think she was dying:

I started to go higher, and I was frightened, so I just sort of demanded to re-enter the connection, and it happened. And I couldn't do anything but just tremble, I was trembling like crazy once I got back in my body, and holding onto [her lover] for a kind of an anchor. So then he told me it was okay, that this happens to other people. One reason I was scared was because I'd only really ever heard of out-of-body experiences in connection with near-death, and that wasn't very reassuring. My panic over that definitely contributed to the terror I was feeling.

Although none of the lovers reported the 360-degree vision associated with some near-death OBEs, going out of body seemed to grant them greater objectivity and discernment than their normal body-bound vision. Sandra was dismayed to see herself the way others did:

People always said, "Oh, gosh, you're really thin," and "You should gain weight," and "You look anorexic" and that kind of thing. And then when I actually saw myself, I realized, oh my God, I really *am* thin. That was the first thing I noticed. In a mirror, it's different. But when you actually see yourself like this, you *really* see yourself.

While out of their bodies, some lovers became aware that they were telepathically reading the unspoken thoughts and feelings of their partners, just as NDErs have reported awareness of the unspoken thoughts of loved ones, hospital workers, and rescuers (Moody, 1975, 1977; Ring, 1980, 1984). Telepathy in lovemaking is no different. As in NDE records, telepathy in lovemaking accounts was often, though not always, accompanied by being out-of-body.

Respondents who reported telepathic insights indicated that they had verified them with the person involved, usually the partner.

Telepathic information received during lovemaking could involve present or past thoughts. One respondent said,

Some of the impressions were songs, like the sounds of bells, or I'd hear a word. I'd ask, "What significance does this have for you?" And he'd say, "Oh, yeah. That was real important to me at such-and-such a time" or "That was a symbol that was important to me for awhile"

Esteban, while making love with his girlfriend at a party, suddenly received a clear message that his best friend, who had accompanied them to the event, was in trouble. He started throwing on his clothes as he ran down the street away from the party, unerringly locating his friend, who was being beaten by a thug.

### **Supernatural beings**

Another transcendent sexual experience with parallels in the NDE literature concerns the here-and-now visions of humans or supernatural beings who are usually understood by percipients to be angels, demons or deities. Visions were defined as subjective, non-volitional imagery superimposed on the here-and-now and experienced by someone with intact ego boundaries. Visions usually consisted of other beings appearing in the room located at a distance from the partner (and thus distinct from *trespasso*). At times they occurred with unusual vividness and intrusiveness in the mind's eye, but appeared to be distinct from the person's deliberate mentation, though they did not overtake the psyche in the way a sense of being possessed seems to do. Lovers saw human or supernatural entities interpreted variously as angels, demons, or deities.

In NDEs, visions of humans may occur in the here-and-now, and in death-bed visions they may occur in the transition from the here-and-now to otherworldly realms. Virtually all these human images are identified as predeceased loved ones who may greet, comfort or guide the dying person (Moody, 1975, 1977; Ring, 1980, 1984). The humans who appear in sexual visions are also dead and may function in somewhat similar ways.

For example, Armand's little sister, whose 6 years of earthly life had been one long process of dying, had appeared to him formerly in his prayer and meditation practice wordlessly heralding spiritual breakthroughs. This had made sense to him because he always thought of her as "close to God" from her short life of innocent suffering. He was therefore astonished when she appeared while he was having sex. But within moments, he was engulfed in the Light. (More of his story appears below).

Keiko, on the other hand, had a frightening vision of an intriguing stranger who was a nodding acquaintance but not someone he actually knew. In the vision, the stranger, instead of smilingly greeting him, aggressively challenged Keiko with an enigmatic question that, at the time, seemed threatening. Totally unnerved, Keiko was unable to go on making love. The sinister encounter haunted Keiko's thinking for two or three years, and at some point during this interval he learned that the man had died. Shortly after that, Keiko resolved his lingering uneasiness, deciding that this had been a catalyst for his personal growth.

The other supernatural beings who appear to lovers are presumed to be angels, demons with non-human features, or deities. They appear superimposed on the here-and-now. Those

definitely identified as angels were reported to have wings and more or less conform to cultural expectations, although they do not seem to shine with light or to resemble the light beings of NDEs. Their presence is passive and soundless but connotes a blessing to those who see them. Demonic descriptions are more difficult to obtain since they do not match anything recognizable. They do not appear threatening but have a frightful appearance. This is a parallel with such beings in NDEs who, if angelic, generally function as guides and protectors leading the dying into the afterlife, especially in Western medieval records (Zaleski, 1987). If demonic, they fetch the dying to sinister otherworldly realms (Bailey, 2001; Murphy, 2001; Osiris and Haraldsson, 1977).

The deities who appeared to those in this study, interestingly enough, are not contemporary ones, and certainly not the popularly recognized avatars of Western NDEs, such as Mary or Jesus. Instead, they are the ancient gods of long-forgotten cultures. These may represent the shadow elements of the participants' psyches. They present an ambiguous image that the participant may interpret positively or negatively. For example, a woman with a phobia of snakes described seeing Quetzalcoatl, the rainbow-feathered serpent (although she did not know this god's name or provenance). The vision appeared as the room around her seemed to darken and the earth cracked with a wrenching groan to reveal the primordial sea, and in it a gigantic, iridescent snake whose coils slipped in and out of the waves and whose visage was almost immediately hidden from her. She was awestruck by its splendor and venerable age but, surprisingly, unafraid. Zebediah, who was visited by a half-stag, half-human figure, took some time to recognize the antlered one as Cernunnos, the Celtic lord of the forest who is still sometimes featured as the Horned God of Saturnalia (which was familiar to Zebediah). The first thoughts of this gay man (who had rejected and been rejected by the Roman Catholic church of his upbringing) were that this was a Satanic visitation, something he needed to exorcise. Performing a ritual brought him some peace, but it was only later that a second, and quite different visitation by the same god seemed to indicate that both experiences were part of a healing process helping him reconcile his sexual preference and spirituality in a completely new way.

In sexual experiences, the gods do not serve as spiritual guides but as entities whose self-revelation may serve as a catalyst for the resolution of an existential or psychological issue. While the near-death entities appear to be strongly culture-bound and contemporary, the sexual entities come from temporally remote, foreign cultures that somehow represent a personally meaningful image to the individual.

### **The Light**

No Beings of Light appear in transcendent sexual experiences, but lovers find themselves going into the Light just as NDErs do. In his initial research, Ring (1980) identified a number of different ways the Light is experienced in NDEs which have remained constant in later studies: as a vision (seeing the Light); as a field that, when entered, seems personified as a visual manifestation of Spirit; and as a transitional space from some darker period to the celestial realms. For a few lovers, the Light also appears as a transition from a previous state that was somehow darker, but it does not lead to another place. Rather it goes on to manifest as personified Spirit. According to Alice, whose period of darkness lasted while she attempted to "pull out" of a frightening OBE that threatened to carry her so far from her body that she feared she would die, the reassurance of her lover allowed her to settle back and open herself in a way that changed the experience:

There was just this intense but very soft, beautiful, beautiful, brilliant light. It was light but kind of all colors, like a prism reflects different colors but isn't a color... I was just washed

over with joy, complete and intense – the most beautiful joy you could ever feel, the joy of being united, like the joy you feel when you see your parents after a long time away... It could be broken down into a whole bunch more individual sensations afterward, like awe and a sense of the understanding of God, understanding how completely, infinitely precious we all are, how amazingly precious you are and I am.

Such experiences are beatific, ecstatic. In them, just as in NDE accounts (Ring, 1984, p. 83) people feel pure love, total acceptance, forgiveness of sins, homecoming, instantaneous and nonverbal communication, and a sense of absolute truth). However, for the most part, such experiences still suggest duality.

Although the Near-Death literature does not appear to contain fine-grained phenomenological distinctions between dualistic and non-dual experiences of the Light, suggestions of non-duality exist in at least some records. It may be that this moment is so fleeting that it either is relatively obscured for the individual whose unfolding personal drama is more compelling, or that near-death researchers have not attached the significance to this state that most contemplative paths (and phenomenologists) do. For example, Mellin Thomas-Benedict fleetingly mentions what may be one in his lengthy NDE narrative:

The interesting point was that I went into the Void, I came back with this understanding that God is not there. God is here [laughs]... People are so busy trying to become God that they ought to realize that we are already God and God is becoming us. That's what it is really about. (Ring and Valerino, 1998, p. 289)

In the majority of sexual experiences, duality in the Light is merely a preliminary for the formless, boundarilessness of *unio mystica*, a state in which nothing exists but the infinite Absolute. *Unio mystica* in the sex study was defined as the non-dual dissolution of time, space and agency sensed as a complete identification with the absolute principle that represents All Being (usually described as God). It is a formless, dimensionless, infinite awareness typically suffused with light, love, and ecstatic bliss as described in Western mysticism. Aspects of this experience resemble strongly NDE reports of "going into the Light."

All categories, including the observer and observed, shatter. As Esther says of the transition, "I'm content in the Light because I'm also there observing it. I love it when this happens, but there is that moment when it begins, and I step in it without that awareness. It may be non-dual for a few seconds, and then I'm there observing it, so it's not there."

Or as Armand relates, the self completely disappears and must be reconstituted. It is only afterward that the experience can be constructed and realized:

I felt myself disappear. It was like nothingness, in the sense that I wasn't as I am now. I couldn't feel that normal sense of myself. My sense of my body was gone, completely absent. There's a point at which I *wasn't*...

I remember that after I came back to myself, it was totally dark, and I was in this room, and I had to recall all that had happened. But what especially brought me back to my senses at some point was that [my partner] noticed that something was wrong with me... He asked me what had happened, and I said something like, "I was just with God," something about God.

Then I realized that I remembered my little sister, and I started having this reaction. I remember sobbing, actually sobbing after I came back, one of those instances where

sobbing felt like joy and sadness both at the same time, and I couldn't tell which was which. I was laughing hilariously and really crying at the same time.

For one woman, no preliminaries existed at all. She only remembered lying down. A formless state that could have lasted a second or hours enveloped her in which there was nothing but Light, and only afterward realization:

There was nothing to focus on because that was all there was. There were no thoughts. I didn't have any cognitive processing ... just this engulfing white Light. That was all I was aware of, and this incredible sense of compassion and love. It was just that Light, and this overwhelming feeling of love and compassion...There was an experience of the actual radiation of the Light, the energy of that going out and flowing out, and I was very aware of being that sensation. I can't say I was *having* a sensation. The sensation was just what was.

### **Transformation**

The transformative effects of NDEs have been extensively documented by Moody (1975; Moody and Perry, 1988), Ring (e.g., 1982, 1984; Ring and Valerino, 1998), Sabom (1982), Flynn (1984), and others. In fact, Ring's Life Changes Inventory, developed for and from his Near-Death research, has been so extensively used that its categories have effectively driven the results of many altered-state studies. The primary areas of transformation resulting from NDEs are: increased spirituality in a universal and personal sense, though usually not in conformance with mainstream religious beliefs; greater sense of personal purpose and meaning; increased concern and compassion for others; enhanced paranormal abilities, including changes in the body's electromagnetic field; decreased materialism and concern for appearances; decreased fear of death; and increased belief in an afterlife.

By contrast, the questions concerning the aftereffects of transcendent sexual experiences were completely open-ended ("Did this experience affect you? If so, how?" "What did this experience mean to you? If a spiritual meaning was ascribed, "What seemed spiritual to you about this?" and "What learning, if any, did you take from this experience?" Nevertheless, they elicited reports remarkably similar to the categories reported by NDErs, with the exception of the last three, which may be artifacts of death. However, certain "sexual artifacts" are parallel to these "death artifacts" showing how the context may shape results.

Forty lovers (44%) reported a radical shift in their religious or spiritual beliefs as a result of their sexual experiences. Some self-identified atheists or agnostics became convinced that Spirit (however understood) is a real force in the cosmos, many of them taking up spiritual vocations, undergoing long-term spiritual training, or adopting formal religious beliefs and practices. Others converted from a previously held belief system to a new one, as indicated in the demographic data. For example, one self-described pragmatic, hard-core materialist, a physician who dismissed all forms of spirituality as misguided wishful thinking, characterized life after his sexual episode this way:

I felt that I had just awoken from a dream that...had been so realistic that I had never before realized that all my previous memories were merely an illusion of wakefulness... I remember saying to myself that all those Bible stories were correct and there really is a God...

I understand what happened to me by now but have felt a need, as I grow older, to transmit some of this to others who suffer so much with their needless fears and doubts...

I have a bad case of what Alan Watts labeled the “divine madness” and I never want to be cured... In some mysterious way, I was touched by God... I’m embarrassed, but mostly I consider myself the luckiest man alive.

The next most frequent outcome was personal growth, cited by 39 people (43%). This included all manner of positive changes in an individual's life or way of thinking as a result of a transcendent sexual event. For many, this involved discovering unusual, even paranormal, capacities, such as the ability for sensing subtle energies, or conducting intuitive diagnostics and healing through visualization and laying on of hands. Indeed, a number of people took up vocations as professional healers and body workers subsequent to their sexual experience. For others, personal growth involved the strength and determination to make positive alterations in their lives, such as changing professions, shedding limiting relationships, ceasing dysfunctional behavior, and discarding self-limiting beliefs, often despite formidable hindrances. One woman whose livelihood had depended on a business partnership with her husband (with whom she had these transcendent experiences but whose marriage was dysfunctional) ultimately divorced him and took up another vocation:

Those experiences did change my life. I felt more confident and more clear about who I was and where I was going in my life even though my marriage was not good. More secure about myself as a woman, which was a very big surprise to me that that would happen from lovemaking alone... I never came into myself until that happened. I felt more at home, confident, at one with my life and myself as a woman. I became more coordinated physically and maintained perfect weight and fitness.

That experience led to me doing spiritual work with a hands-on healer, and now I'm an apprentice to someone who had a vision of me as a healer. I think the sexual experiences helped trigger or mature the energy that now comes through my hands.

Twenty-three (25%) reported significant improvements in their ability to relate to others, especially a capacity for greater compassion. The primary relationship enhancement occurred with the partner, characterized by increased feelings of love and tolerance so that differences and irritating foibles no longer impeded a full, abiding appreciation of the other. It was as though lovers could “hold” a beatific yet unvarnished vision of the partner's totality of negative and positive attributes. Additionally, many find that this tolerance and compassion radiates to others. They were more loving in everyday transactions, a quality that was often related to greater self-acceptance in their reports. According to Elaine,

Your other relationships are enhanced by the experience also because you have changed. Somehow a string of that love experience is woven throughout your other relationships, career, etc. [You gain] tolerance for others who are not so knowing... and great compassion for them as well as others.

Sixteen persons (18%) said their understanding of reality had changed drastically. This outcome category included a number of persons who were reluctant to ascribe a spiritual motive force to their experiences, but who frankly said there was no known way of accounting for what had happened short of the supernatural. They reported a sense of awe and mystery about the workings of the universe in the wake of transcendent sex, regardless of attribution. Betty observed:

It lent a credibility to the idea that tangible reality isn't all there is. It's that sense that the world is sure weird and mystical and powerful and all those things. That wasn't my reality before. And I have this different way of defining the other now, noticing now that I have

more of the Buddhist definition of compassion, of experiencing pain that the other carries with them as part of me instead of something else. I'm amazed at how I experience this kind of connectedness to everything, not just people. Everything has more of a shared, connected feeling, it's all one thing, so I can feel your pain in my heart and at the same time I can feel the joy that is there in all creation.

Just as NDEs cause people to revise negative ideas about death and the afterlife, transcendent sex changes attitude toward lovemaking. Twelve (13%) said that their experiences had convinced them that the act of sex was holy in and of itself. This finding was associated both with people who were promiscuous and casually transient about sex as well as those who were repressed. The former began to limit their relationships out of respect for the sacredness of the act. An example of the latter comes from Norberto, a former Jesuit priest from South America:

It really is a way... to recognize that, really, life is a continuum and that nothing is a lower-level type of thing or higher-level type of thing. There is a connection between Spirit and the body.

There is a poem or song in Venezuela... about a farmer talking with a priest and saying, "Well, Father, forgive me, but I think the skies are in the eyes of [my lover] and every night after I pray my Hail Mary, I find God in [her] womb."

I found this to be true. God is not only to be found in the solitude of your prayers or in doing social justice among poor people, but can be found in the womb of my partner. That song and that experience is my hidden music that I can always remember, like an overture of God's love for me.

Finally, 8 people (9%), including all 7 in the sample with histories of childhood sexual abuse, said they had achieved dramatic levels of personal healing concerning sexual issues. They reported an absence of previous pathologic symptoms, including vaginismus, dissociation, and numbness, as well as a greatly increased ability to enjoy sex, remain present and engaged, and have orgasms. In fact, one of these women ultimately became a sexual surrogate and healer as a result of her transcendent experiences. In the words of Bengt, whose arousal formerly caused him to be "*out of here, long gone, far away... very split off and very dissociated:*"

I can be very present and feeling my body and be present to this other person, looking into my lover's eyes, looking at her, feeling her, and moving together, and feeling this thing very, very deep in me that I call my essence, feeling it is becoming transparent to my lover, feeling that here are two people who are so present and so relaxed and so open to each other that that they are part of a whole spiritual understanding, that they can be naked, shed their egos and just be right there with each other in the most intimate way, from essence to essence... I believe that sex is sacred, that it is a gift, and that it can be an occasion for grace.

### **Love and Death**

In NDE studies, it has been suggested that the deeper the experience – that is, the farther the phenomena proceed beyond the here-and-now into the subtler experiences of the Beings of Light, Light, and celestial realms – the greater the transformation (Morse and Perry, 1992). This may be somewhat true for sexual altered states, as well. People whose experiences occurred mainly in the here-and-now were slightly less inclined to attribute a spiritual source or



interpretation to them than those who were transported to other realms or times, who sensed an otherworldly presence, or who experienced the formlessness of the Void or *unio mystica*. Nevertheless, sometimes even here-and-now experiences, such as OBEs and the like, had profound effects that radically reoriented people's beliefs and their way of being in the world. And although this may seem like a matter of only passing interest, it is one of several threads that goes to the center of the knotty matter of spiritual revelation and realization.

To take up one of the threads suggested by the kundalini proponents, clearly some theorists (Krishna, 1971, 1972a,b, 1974, 1975; Keiffer, 1994; Kason, 1994) would be inclined to attribute both sexual and NDE phenomena and transformation to kundalini awakenings, especially in those cases where kundalini was supposed to have reached the crown chakra with strong visions of the Light. Indeed, these theorists also seem to attribute virtually any evolutionary process, including all those found in the indigenous and contemplative literatures, to kundalini. There is an elegance and parsimony to such a theory: it can provide an explanation that instinctively feels right concerning the life force as sacred, as the basis for whatever source of individual agency might be considered a person's soul or spirit, and it could provide that elusive link with material reality that has dogged scientific-religious debates. In other words, this kundalini argument seems another hopeful holy grail, a theory adequate to explain a lot of puzzling data while according with many people's spiritual beliefs and desires.

Of course, even its proponents admit that as yet no empirical basis for kundalini exists (at least as described in the classical and contemporary literature). Furthermore, as the present arguments are configured, it seems curious – to state it mildly – that proponents somehow can make kundalini awakening the cause for virtually any non-ordinary experience, including those brought about by contemplative or other approaches that deny and repress the body, especially its sexual energies, for almost exclusively cerebral activity (Zen meditation, for instance). At a minimum, considerable research would be necessary merely to ascertain whether something like kundalini is activated during NDEs, much less to determine whether it can be adventitiously and casually activated during sex to levels comparable to that of the highest yogic attainment (or that it can be activated by contemplative techniques that repress bodily energies).

Whether the source for all spiritual experiences is kundalini or something else, the fact that adventitious, everyday events may provide profound spiritual openings flies in the face of much of the accepted spiritual tradition. This is the confounding idea. "Real" kundalini awakening is supposed to be attained only by assiduous aspirants, and of them, only one in 1,000 is likely to become realized (Woodroffe, 1974/1919). Until now, it has been believed that only NDErs who go into the Light may have a momentary experience of the Light – with its residual access to activated energetic power. These beliefs closely parallel established beliefs about spirituality and contemplative paths: only years of dogged spiritual practice, a rare miracle of divine grace, or a terrible existential crisis like dying permits people to "see the Light." Salvation can never be easy or democratic.

Without confusing full realization with profoundly transformative spiritual openings, the fact that mystical revelations need not be "deserved" or earned through practice has challenged some believers (even those who nominally believe in grace). Already the NDE has been attacked by religious traditionalists (Rawlings, 1978; Grootius, 1995), who insist there must be something terribly wrong about NDEs because "obviously undeserving" experiencers ("sinners," whether they be suicides, homosexuals, criminals, unbelievers, etc.) should not have beatific episodes that rightly belong to the "good" or the hard-striving faithful. Going farther than that, saying that NDErs are no longer an enviable, "lucky" elite, or that the profound exigencies of dying are not required for a glimpse of the farther shores would surely overturn more appercarts.

It may be that any event that makes here-and-how reality seem less solid will suffice, and that such events can be as simple, quotidian, and ubiquitous as making love. It may be that Spirit is truly everywhere upon the land, so that the beatific vision can be found – and is still being found – by ordinary people going about their ordinary lives.

What would it mean to believe – really to believe – that, as virtually all the paths teach, Spirit is right here, right now, and only our conditioned blindness keeps us from its recognition? What would it mean to the established traditions with their rules, teachers, and centuries of cherished teachings? What would it mean to the prevalent interpretation of NDEs as a means of personal realization that is won through the confrontation of mortality and death? What would it mean to consider the NDE's mystical visions and transformation as “merely” experiences of the Spirit all around us everyday, not of an afterlife in an “otherworld,” but a realization of what is present here all the time? What would it mean to think that embodied life is not something to escape for a somehow ravishingly exquisite “spiritual” existence? What would mean to the kundalini theorists who traditionally seek to transform “gross, genital” sexual energy into something that is non-physical? Why must spirituality be hard, and embodied existence the hellish audition for heaven?

Civilization has tended to separate sex and Spirit and denied that the potential for direct spiritual experience is universally distributed among humans. Earlier cultures did not make this separation. It may be that “discovering” NDEs and now transcendent sex represents, not an increasing number of extraordinary paths of access or the increasing enlightenment of humanity, so much as a return to a more integrated sacredness of personal experience and of this life in the here-and-now that the ancients knew and that is still observed in many traditional cultures. As astonishing as these sexual openings are, it is the way they hallow “ordinary” life that seems truly important, something that some NDErs seem to remember but that many forget in their yearning for what appears to be a spiritual realm far beyond this world. The comforting message of both some NDErs and realized spiritual adepts actually agrees with what lovers who have these transcendent experiences say, if we can resist the need to make it difficult and other. At its simplest, it was put by one participant in the sex study this way:

I hold those moments as truly enlightening states that allow me to come back with a sense of wellbeing and groundedness. Everything is perfect and peaceful. And there are no doors and no years, nothing but this place and this moment you are in. All is right with the world, and I just rest in that.

## **Glossary**

Agency – Sense of active, decision-making self, the intentional aspect of awareness.

Aphrodite – The Greek name for the goddess Astarte, the Queen of Heaven, a multifaceted deity from the land of Canaan, who was originally associated, among other things, with prophecy and battle. In Greece, probably owing to the sexual rituals closely associated with her identity as Astarte and Ishtar in Canaan and Babylon, she came to represent erotic love. To the Greeks her worship became a mystery cult of eroticism, especially the love of women, and the priestesses who served her took lovers from the men and women came to worship her.

Apocrypha – Writings of unknown authorship, in this case, the sacred writings that were an integral part of the Greek version of the Jewish Bible (known as the Septuagint) and of the King James Bible – until Puritanical influences largely removed them from the Western canon. The Apocrypha represents an important extension of the Old Testament and a link between the Old and New Testaments.

Baalim – Plural form of the Mesopotamian gods name Baal, which means Master. Baal was a young, warlike sky-god associated with seasonal son-lover consorts of the Great Mother goddesses and with the bringing of rain to the earth. Baal is associated with kingship in Mesopotamia, and the role of Baal is thought to have been enacted and assumed by the priest-kings of the major temples and city-states for enacting the cult rituals associated with the New Year, including ceremonial battles, sex with his sister Anath (another form of the many goddesses who were also mothers/lovers), and resurrection.

Bacchus – The god of wine and other fruits of the vine, also known as Dionysis, who taught humans viticulture. Beneficent and terrible by turns, Bacchus was worshiped by the Maenads or Bacchantes, women who were frenzied with wine. The cult of Bacchus as it developed in Rome combined freedom and ecstasy with the brutality that drunkenness can also create. It was extremely widespread in Italy and featured unrestrained homosexual and heterosexual licentiousness. The Greek Dionysian revels were quite different from the license of drunken frenzy and sexuality of the bacchanals.

Baul – From Sanskrit roots associated with the words for crazy and confused, the Bauls are the madmen of God, the mad lovers of Bhagava who lives within them. They are considered crazy by outsiders, who consider their behavior and spiritual practices to be a reversal of normal religious actions, and they themselves seek to be crazy with divine madness. One prominent form their divine madness takes involves sexual ecstasy.

Ceres – The Latin form of the Greek goddess of cereal Demeter, associated with the earth's fertility, especially the harvest and with Demeter's daughter Persephone, the maiden of springtime. Ceres' worship formed a central part of the Eleusinian Mysteries, times of holy processions, dances, sacrifice and most probably sexual rites. Like most fertility goddesses of the ancient world, Ceres is touched by sorrow, not from a lover-consort who dies and must be resurrected, but by the abduction of her daughter to the underworld, during which time the mourning mother withholds her gift of fructification from the earth.

Chakras – Energetic centers or vortices in the body recognized in Eastern medicine and metaphysics. They are located along the primary energetic meridians along which the vital or sacred life energy flows, and their activation or cultivation is a goal in various forms of yoga, especially Tantra.

Channeling – The sense of having the psyches, especially the emotional experiences of a nameless group of people pour through the individual (similar to Grof's (1975, 1985) group identification or group consciousness). Such experiences occur in the here-and-now without disruption of the ego but with a sense of identification with the group's experience and awareness.

Clairsentience – Closely related to past lives in terms of the information contained in the experience. Though phenomenologically distinct, clairsentience refers to a sudden preternatural knowledge of "the truth." In clairsentience, a revelation that seems to come from nowhere arises fully developed without any apparent relationship to the passing events or any stimulus in the environment. People variously described this as "knowing everything," "realizing the truth," and having the "scales fall from their eyes." Typically the knowledge revealed concerns previously hidden dynamics of the lovers' relationship, and a sudden ability to comprehend exactly what is going on, however subtle or complex ("the true nature of

things”), which is usually construed in a negative light (“it will never work”). Despite the fact that the revelation is typically saddening – indeed, often hopeless – people simultaneously sense an inner strength and resilience that enable them to make “the right decisions.”

Cybele (also Kybele) – An ancient goddess of many attributes, probably of Anatolian origin closely associated with Ishtar and Inanna in Mesopotamia. One of the central stories associated with this complex deity involved her giving birth to Attis, her son who also became her lover but who later, either through accident or in order not to be unfaithful to her, was emasculated. In her sorrow, she lamented the dead youth every spring in the renewal rituals that became associated with Easter. Male initiates castrated themselves and used their blood in a three-day mourning ritual until Attis was said to have risen again when spring and fecundity came back to the earth.

Deity possession – A sense of being possessed by divinities who overtake and displace the psyche in the here-and-now. These forces are invisible, but they carry a distinct sense of supernatural personification identified with fierce archetypal beings, such as Kali, Pan, Dionysis, and the like.

Dionysis – A somewhat more refined and later version of the Greek god Bacchus, the god of the vine who dies and is resurrected. His primary worship was an annual five-day feast involving plays and poetry as well as an association with the Eleusian mysteries of the death and resurrection of the earth, which seemed to become more subtle and refined over time until eventually some worshippers did not even drink wine. Earlier versions of Dionysis stressed his wild side, which today is more associated with Bacchus.

Dumuzi – A shepherd deity who was the son and lover of the Great Mother goddess Inanna of Mesopotamia. A representative of Dumuzi was selected every year by the high priestesses of Inanna to serve in this capacity, and so essential was this role that the kings of Sumeria were known as Dumuzi. Only by demonstrating his prowess as a lover in pleasing the goddess could Dumuzi ultimately win her, no matter how many gifts he brought her. He became the ever renewed and ever dying consort of the life-giving Lover-Mother, with the vicissitudes of his existence in relation to her embodying the seasonal patterns of the earth’s fructification.

Glossolalia – Speaking in tongues. This typically refers to a state in which individuals in a religious trance or ecstasy begin spontaneously vocalizing complex combinations of sounds that seem to have the patterns of a language not known to the person in a normal state.

Gnostic gospels – Sacred texts discovered near Nag Hammadi in Egypt relating to the life of Jesus, Jewish and Christian spirituality, especially mysticism, that have been routinely suppressed and excluded from the canonical gospels by what became the church establishment.

Grace – The free, undeserved or unearned favor of God conferred upon a human being, associated with a state of exemption from the normal vicissitudes of life or salvation.

Inanna – The Mistress of the Heavens in ancient Sumerian culture, Inanna regulated heaven and earth, including the other gods. Over the centuries of her worship, her identity changed, but she was associated with the fructification of the earth and the generation of all life. This role was enacted by the high priestesses in a sacred new year’s mating ritual every year with a lover of their choosing known as Dumuzi who represented Inanna’s son and consort. Their mating brought joy and fertility to the land, but later Dumuzi appeared to usurp Inanna’s throne and to enjoy her absence while she was away, causing her to kill him. His death brought her sorrow, and draught and famine to the earth until he was restored in the next year’s sacred mating festival.

Isis – “The goddess of many names,” Isis is actually a Greek name for the primary goddess of ancient Egypt. Regarded as the creatrix of all life, fate, the heavens, the earth, and healing, she restored life to the body of her lover Osiris and conceived a child from him. She represented the productive powers of the earth and the primary aspects of woman as wife and mother, lover and mistress, and beautiful virgin. Under the centuries of her worship by the Greeks and Romans, her identity became fused with that of Astarte, Ceres, Demeter, and other fertility and sexual goddesses. The later mystery rites associated with her cult are thought to have been primarily sexual renewal ceremonies associated with the coming of spring and involved priestesses who made love with worshipers on such a regular basis that in Rome the cult of Isis was closely associated with prostitution.

Ishtar – Probably the best known name and figure of the Great Goddess in Mesopotamia also known as Astarte and Inanna, she was the Queen of Heaven and Great Mother associated with the star Venus. She had a son-lover Tammuz, virtually identical with Dumuzi, and her worship was closely associated with sexual love and pleasure. Priestesses of Ishtar took lovers from her worshippers, and male devotees castrated themselves to serve her. The expression of sexuality as a sacred act was a central feature of her cult.

Kabbalah – A collection of mystical Jewish writings dating from medieval times but originating beliefs extending probably to the time beyond the Dead Sea scrolls. This collection of traditions forms the basis for Jewish mysticism to this day, including a metaphysics that has influenced not only Jews but Christians and Western esotericism generally.

Kali – Kali, the Hindu deity whose name literally means Time, is the dark goddess of many names who is another manifestation of the divine feminine principle Devi. She is the Terrible Mother, the goddess from who is constantly giving birth and devouring her babies, from whom comes all life and all death, whose loins are constantly producing life and who pours forth and drinks blood.

Kensho – A state of formlessness, or of the Void in Zen Buddhism, this word is often considered synonymous with enlightenment or satori.

Kriyas – Certain spontaneous gestures or movements associated with deep meditative states, especially in yoga.

Kundalini – Nonordinary percepts of energy fields in the absence of any discernible stimulus, especially sensations of heat, subtle force fields, light, and liquefaction, congruent with descriptions in various mystical traditions. These experiences occur in the here-and-now without significant alteration in the usual sense of self. These include sensations of heat, light, energy, and liquefaction, and forces that cause involuntary movements (mudras and kriyas), copious female ejaculate (amrita), and glossolalia – all well documented in various spiritual traditions.

Liber – The Roman version of Bacchus but almost exclusively regarded as a fertility god. He was associated with various phallic cults, and his rites were celebrated at crossroads where phallic shrines were set up and where worshippers engaged in sex. Liber’s magic penis was considered not only a source of sexual pleasure but a disperser of unhappiness.

The Light – A bright illumination usually experienced as the Absolute, or Divine Force usually personified by Westerners as God. Recent common references to the Light come from Near-Death Experiencers describing seeing or being enveloped by a beneficent radiance characterized by an all-encompassing and omniscient source of love.

Lingam – The penis, especially as a sacred symbol of the mystical masculine principle, in Hinduism.

“Little death” – Euphemism for orgasm, attributed to Shakespeare.

Magical connections to nature – Magical connections with entities in the natural world concern a sense of non-ordinary relationship to plants, animals, and natural forces, especially an ability to participate in shared agency with those entities beyond the normal limitations of encapsulated egoic awareness. Plants and animals are experienced as having their own intelligence, which can now be entrained with that of the participant. Natural forces, especially the earth, may be perceived to be animate.

Merging with the partner – Merging is defined as a dissolution of spatial boundaries, particularly the familiar somatic sense that the self is contained within the skin, accompanied by some sense of self-dissolution (loss of ego boundaries) to include the lover but not other objects in the environment. Merging includes a blending of agency into a state of unity and oneness, so that individuals are unable to say which person is causative. Frequently the here-and-now shrinks so that environmental cues vanish and the blended lovers become the focus of experience.

Meridians – Energetic pathways of the body recognized in Eastern medicine, especially associated with the movement of the vital energy or sacred life force called chi or prana.

Mithras – An ancient Persian deity whose worship became a serious rival to Christianity during the Roman era. Mithra was associated with the sun, bulls, cereal and the precession of the equinoxes.

Mudras – Certain spontaneous postures or positions of the body, especially of the hands, associated with deep meditative states, especially in yoga.

Noetic – Having to do with consciousness or the study of consciousness.

One with nature – A sense of becoming one with all of creation. This diffuse state involves a limited melting of ego boundaries to become a part of the fabric of all nature, usually described as a blending with all the flora, fauna, and life-forces of the terrestrial world. Individuals remain in the here-and-now with an observing and active self that feels blended with other creatures and natural forces so that the “separate” quality of or status of humanity apart from other living beings vanishes.

Out-of-Body Experiences – OBEs involve retaining an intact sense of ego in the here-and-now but having the personal sense of self and agency leave the spatial confines of the body, which is still identified as part of the self. Ego is experienced continuously, without any break at the time of dislocation. People in fact are startled to find themselves outside their bodies.

Displacement lacks a sense of locomotion [of the body] and is discerned through a realistic change in visual vantage point to a location outside, and usually above the body.

Pan – Part goat, part man, Pan was one of the earth gods of the Greeks representing the wilder side of humanity, sexual love and sensual pleasure, especially dancing and music. Pan was always pursuing nymphs and presiding over revels. He was the patron god of shepherds and goatherds. His possession of goat’s hooves and horns and his association with ecstatic sensual pleasure may have led to his demonization by later Christians as the appearance attributed to the Devil as a tempter.

Past lives – Perception of being transported back in time and space as other individuals in past-life experiences. There is the sensation of “seeing” or experiencing oneself moving through scenes belonging to previous eras and different locations. These experiences may be disturbing because the events of those lives that are perceived often had unhappy outcomes.

Psi (psychic) experiences – A collective term for paranormal phenomena.

Priapus – Originally a Roman vegetation god, the erotic qualities of this garden figure came to dominate his cult and his representation, which became an immense phallus. Sometimes he was represented completely as a penis or as a penis with a tiny human head or human features. He became a totally sexual deity, and his phallus was sometimes conceived of as a weapon or instrument of sadistic sexual acts or even punishment.

Pseudepigrapha – A collective term referring to writings given a false title or attribution; in this case, a collection of writings collectively known as the Jewish Pseudepigrapha dating from the beginning of the Christian era but spuriously ascribed to Old Testament spiritual leaders and prophets.

Scientism – A belief in the omnipotence of scientific knowledge and methods, especially as the only source of truth or legitimate knowledge.

Serapis – The Egyptian god more commonly referred to in modern times as the Apis Bull, which comes from the Greek. Worshiped in Memphis, Serapis was associated with Osiris as a manifestation of the dead fertility god alive and powerful on earth. Under the Greeks and Romans, the ancient Egyptian associations with this god were largely transmuted into sexual rites.

Shapeshifting – A form of possession, in which individuals in the here-and-now have an alteration in their sense of self so that the ego seems to be taken over by another, typically an animal, but sometimes a plant. Mentation is altered with such vividness that the body itself is also experienced as changing in form, sensation, and appearance.

Shekinah – The divine feminine principle in Hebraic lore, especially in the Kabbalah, the Bride of the Sabbath, God's female and manifest or immanent aspect.

Tantra – A mystical form of Hinduism (and associated with some forms of Buddhism) dating from about 5000 BCE that involves the awakening and purposeful channeling and refinement of sexual energy through various practices to participate in the unification of the god Shiva and the goddess Shakti whose sexual embrace sustains the universe. Although in classic Indian Tantra, male initiates originally used female partners, the aim of the practice was gradually to replace these surrogates of the Divine Feminine by meditating on the Goddess and moving sexual energy in the body up the spine and through the mystical partner until it completed a circuit through the worshipper's male and female energy meridians with the macrocosm, thus embodying the mixture of male and female principles sustaining the cosmos. Most Western and known versions of Tantra are fairly corrupt; it remains a mystery cult with a largely oral and experiential tradition known only to initiates in its pure form.

Telepathy – The ability to access the unspoken thoughts and feelings of others.

The Third Presence – An experience of the Third is defined on the basis of a phenomenological distillation provided by Jungian analyst John R. Haul (1990). It is a felt sense of an autonomous, invisible, impersonal field or force that seems to exist between the two lovers and to arise from their mutuality. The Third is to some extent co-created by their union, but it is also impervious to deliberate manipulation by either partner, and cannot be reduced to them or to their relationship. It seems to exhibit its own transpersonal intelligence. The sense of the Third in this study was variously described as a nameable entity, such as the Holy Ghost; a hallowed atmosphere that produced beatific sensations and emotions; and a beneficent state of mind, likened to a state of grace. The Third was always experienced very positively and with some degree of volition in terms of the participant's willingness to engage the state.

Transports – Transports describes spatial dislocation in which someone with intact ego functioning seems to be displaced to another location through a combination of altered visual

imagery and somatic sensations of relative weightlessness (floating) or forward motion. During lovemaking, transports are typically accompanied by feelings of bliss.

Trespasso – An involuntary, here-and-now vision of another head, or a succession of heads (usually but not always human) superimposed on the lover's head. The hallucination, a recognized phenomenon in many traditions, typically does not extend below the partner's shoulders.

Unio mystica – The non-dual dissolution of time, space and agency sensed as a complete identification with the absolute principle that represents All Being (usually described as God). It is a formless, dimensionless, infinite awareness typically suffused with light and ecstatic bliss as described in Western mysticism.

Venus – An alternative form of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty who entranced humans and gods. She is the epitome of feminine wiles, sexual love and the power of seduction as well as the goddess of virgins.

Virilis – Also known as Fortuna Virilis, this Roman god was worshipped by women who performed their worship in men's public baths where their bodies, especially their genitals, were on display and accessible for sexual activity.

Visions – Visions in this study are limited to subjective, non-volitional imagery superimposed on the here-and-now and experienced by someone with intact ego boundaries. Visions usually consisted of other beings appearing in the room, located at a distance from the partner (and thus distinct from trespasso). At times they occurred with unusual vividness and intrusiveness in the mind's eye, but appeared to be distinct from the person's deliberate mentation though they did not overtake the psyche.

The Void – Impersonal non-duality or Void experiences constitute a non-dual dissolution of time, space and agency sensed as the primordial emptiness that underlies and also constitutes the cosmos. It is a formless, dimensionless, infinite awareness that may or may not be accompanied by light and bliss, as described in Eastern spiritual traditions.

Yang –The active, projecting, masculine, positive primal force in Taoism, associated with male sexuality, especially semen. It is the complement of yin; yin and yang are strengthened and energized by contact with, and absorption of the other. Humans are considered to have a mixture of yin and yang in their natures.

Yin –The passive, receptive, feminine, negative primal force in Taoism, and the complement of yang. In Taoist sexual practices, the yin force is represented by the woman's sexuality, especially her vaginal secretions, which are considered extremely powerful.

Yoni –The vagina, especially as a sacred symbol of the mystical feminine principle, in Hinduism.



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**Jenny Wade, PhD**

235 Uplands Circle

Corte Madera, CA 94925

415 927 0131

[jwadephd@yahoo.com](mailto:jwadephd@yahoo.com)

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