

## Near-Death and UFO Encounters As Shamanic Initiations: Some Conceptual and Evolutionary Implications

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IN RECENT YEARS, there has been an effort, particularly by American folkloric scholars (e.g., Hufford 1982; Rojcewicz 1986), to bring some conceptual order to a disparate array of paranormal and transcendental experiences whose academic study has heretofore tended to be associated with distinct and somewhat insular disciplines. Included in this set of nonordinary occurrences are such phenomena as out-of-body experiences (traditionally the province of parapsychology), near-death experiences (near-death studies, medicine), shamanic experiences (anthropology), psychedelic experiences (transpersonal psychology), night terrors (folklore), and UFO encounters (“ufology”). That there are significant similarities among subsets of these experiences, both in terms of phenomenology and aftereffects, has long been recognized, but so far there has been no sustained scholarly effort to build conceptual bridges between these experiential domains or to foster their comparative study, despite some expressions of interest in such undertakings (e.g., Ring and Agar 1986). In the spirit of this kind of endeavor, the need for which has been persuasively set forth by Rojcewicz (1986), I would like to present here a framework for a partial conceptual integration of two nonordinary experiences previously held to be quite separate and unrelated. I am referring to near-death experiences (NDEs) and alleged UFO encounters (UFOEs),<sup>1</sup> between which I believe there are some hitherto unsuspected links.

This paper has second purpose as well. After delineating certain commonalities between these types of experiences, I intend to explore their possible joint significance for the evolution of human consciousness. This will involve an attempt to embed these and other types of nonordinary experiences in a *second* kind of conceptual matrix that will provide a still more encompassing perspective in terms of which to view the implicit connections among the variety of experiences we will be concerned with.

Before setting out on the first of these conceptual journeys, I need to enter a couple of caveats. First, in stressing certain linkages between NDEs and UFOEs, I make no claim that *all* varieties of these two phenomena are thus entwined. UFOEs especially cover an extraordinary range, and therefore no one model is likely to do even nominal justice to them all. In this instance, however, I will be dealing with a particular and nowadays increasingly well-known *type* of UFOE, the nature of which I will specify shortly. Second, the kind of integrative model I will offer here attempts to join these experiences only in terms of their *archetypal patterning* and *functional significance*. At the *phenomenological* level, NDEs and UFOEs are of course quite dissimilar, but it is in their “deep structure,” as it were, rather than in their surface contentual manifestations that important commonalities can be discerned.

### Prototypic NDEs and UFOEs

Research on modern NDEs has been carried on for more than a decade; thus the prototypic pattern for this type of nonordinary experience will be quite familiar to most readers of this journal. This pattern is made up of such elements as (1) a psychological sense of separation from the physical body; (2) a feeling of overwhelming peace and

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well-being; (3) a sense of movement through a dark but not frightening space, sometimes described as a “tunnel”; (4) the perception of a brilliant white or golden light by which one is (5) gradually encompassed and from which one (6) feels a sense of total love and unconditional acceptance; (7) an encounter with a “being of light” or other spiritual entities who (8) may afford the occasion for panoramic life review following which (if it occurs) one (9) may decide or be told to “return to one’s body,” thereby (10) terminating the NDE. Such experiences tend to cohere in a highly meaningful way for the individual, are almost always said to be “hyper-real” (i.e., not like a dream or hallucination), and usually have a profound transformative effect on the survivor (e.g., Ring 1980, 1984; Sabom 1982; Grey 1985; Flynn 1986; Atwater 1988). In any event, this is the kind of NDE that will be of focal relevance here.

Another type of experience that, owing to the popularity of such books as *Communion* (Strieber 1987) and *Intruders* (Hopkins 1987a), is likewise coming to be increasingly well known to a broad segment of the American public is the so-called UFO abduction experience.<sup>2</sup> This is an encounter for which the prototypic pattern can be, for our purposes at least, reduced to the following four elements: (1) a sense of being taken away, usually against one’s will, by one or more humanoid beings, and (2) brought into a strange, alien environment where (3) one is subjected to an invasive physical examination that in some instances seems to have to do with one’s reproductive organs, following which (4) one is returned to the physical world, though not necessarily to exactly the same location where the abduction apparently originated. These experiences often lack the coherence of NDEs, are not infrequently temporarily repressed or forgotten but when recalled are re-experienced as traumatic, and often entail a period of time for which one cannot account (e.g., Lorenzen and Lorenzen 1977; Fowler 1979; Rogo 1980; Hopkins 1981, 1987a; Strieber 1987, Bullard 1987). Again, it is this kind of UFO encounter with which we will be especially concerned in this paper.

Now, when one reads accounts of these two types of prototypic experiences or, better yet, has a chance to talk directly to persons who report having undergone them, one cannot fail to be impressed with the obvious *differences* between them. The typical NDE, for example, is usually recounted in such a way as to impress the reader or listener with its ineffable beauty, transcendental influx or knowledge, and spiritual profundity. In my own work with NDErs, I confess to having often been struck and indeed deeply affected by the radiant glow and strong positive emotions that emanate from NDErs while in the throes of describing their experiences to me. With UFO abductees, on the other hand, both the content and tone are radically different. Here, for instance, one senses one is reading about or listening to people who may feel — especially in the immediate aftermath of their experience — that they have been the victims of a form of psychological rape. Their reactions afterward are indicative in any case of some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder (Spiegel, Hunt, and Dondershine 1988; Laibow 1988), and their difficulties in dealing with their experience are only compounded by the knowledge of others’ likely reactions to learning about the incredible (in the literal sense) circumstances and bizarre events associated with the abduction.

Nevertheless, when one begins to probe beneath the divergent phenomenological surfaces of these two types of experiences, one sees that for all their dissimilarities there does appear to be a common *structural* basis for them both — a shared *archetypal* patterning that binds them. And if I were to try to encapsulate this common element in a single phrase, the one I’d choose is *the shamanic journey*. To see this more clearly now, we need to examine these prototypic experiences from an explicit shamanic perspective. When we do so, it will become apparent that most of the defining features of NDEs and UFOEs can be coordinated to a model of shamanic initiation.

## **NDEs and UFOEs As Shamanic Initiations**

To begin, we need a template of sorts for shamanic initiations in order to appreciate the extent to which such a template might indeed overlap with the underlying form of NDEs and UFOEs. Needless to say, given the enormous wealth of anthropological literature on shamanic initiation, any one model will be a patent oversimplification. Nevertheless, even a crude and overgeneralized outline of some of the main features of this kind of initiation will prove workable for our purposes. In any case, the following account is based chiefly on Eliade (1958, 1964), Nicholson (1987), and Kalweit (1988).

Typically, an individual who may be somewhat unusual because of his (or her) sensitivities or exceptional giftedness — or because he has survived a serious illness, accident, or other ordeal — is selected for shamanic training. He is then separated from his community and put into the hands of his shamanic trainer. The apprentice is required to undergo various ordeals, both physical and psychological, as his training progresses. Often, as is well known, these rites involve powerful dismemberment (and reconstitutive) motifs as the candidate undergoes a death-and-rebirth ordeal — a necessary component for all true initiations, of course, as well as the experiential foundations for a new sense of identity as a shaman. Sacred mysteries are disclosed to the individual as he learns to enter into otherworldly realms and acquires his particular shamanic skills, his power animals, sacred songs, secret language, and so forth. After his initiation is complete, he returns to his community as a healer, a psychopomp, a master of ecstasy, a mystic and visionary — as a man (or woman), in short, who now knows how to live in *two* worlds: the world of the soul as well as that of the body. And though indispensable to the welfare of his community, he often remains somewhat apart from it precisely because of his special knowledge and his unusual and sometimes disturbing presence.

Now, taking this sketch of shamanic initiation as our template, let us see how well it maps onto the underlying form of the prototypical experiences of interest to us. We begin with the NDE. Here, we find ourselves with an individual who has by whatever means been brought to the threshold of apparent imminent biological death, a condition that, as we have seen, is often preludic to a shamanic career. This state of affairs means that at least psychologically and in some cases physically (as when he is removed to a hospital), the individual is separated from his community of peers. Inwardly, he, too, embarks on a journey of initiation, and he is not long into it before he meets the equivalent of his shamanic trainer. A luminous figure — a true psychopomp — will appear to guide the individual in his journey. This figure represents what I call *the archetype of the cosmic shaman*. For in this role he is not merely a guide in the passive sense of escort but is, rather, *a man (or woman) of knowledge*. He is a being who appears to know all about the life of the individual undergoing this experience — and all about the realm into which the individual has entered. And while in this realm, the NDEr will receive — instantaneously and telepathically — the answers to all of his questions from this being, this cosmic shaman. Knowledge will simply flood into his soul as the mysteries of life and death are finally and fully illuminated.

The NDE literature is, of course, replete with such testimonies, and I myself have published quite a few of them (Ring 1984, 50–89). Here, however, I will simply use one illustrative case to indicate the extraordinary clarity and emotional depth of these encounters.

Jayne Smith was in the process of giving birth to her second child when she had her NDE. Hers was a very deep experience of ecstatic gratitude and cosmic knowledge during which she almost immediately lost all body awareness and says she existed, while cradled in the light, as “pure consciousness.” When she later came back to her sense of individualized identity as Jayne, she found herself at the top of a hill where she encountered a group of men. She then said (mentally) to one of them:

“I know what has happened to me. I know that I’ve died....” And [she says] one man in the group did all the talking to me. He was taller than the rest and he had an absolutely marvelous face. It was very noble, very kind. ...He also had about him a great deal of authority... In order to talk, we didn’t have to move our mouths. I only know that I only had to have the impulse of what I wanted to say and he immediately would get that and answer it. I could hear the sound of his voice in my inner ear.

“I said, “Everything [here] is so beautiful, everything is so perfect. What about my sins?”

And he said, “There are not sins, not the way you think of them on earth. The only thing that has any meaning here is what you think.” And then he asked me a question: “What is in your heart?”

And in some incredible way... I was enabled to look deeply inside myself, really into the core of me, into my essence, and I saw what was there was *love* and nothing else. My core was perfect love, loving perfection. I had complete love and acceptance for everything.

And I said to him, “Of course!” And I had the feeling that I was connecting with knowledge that I had known before. And I wondered how on earth I had ever forgotten anything that important...

And then I said, “Can you tell me what everything is all about?”

And he said, “Yes.” And he told me — and it took maybe three sentences at the most. It was so simple. I understood that immediately. I had total comprehension of what he was saying to me. And I remember again saying to him, “Of course!”

And then I said to him, “Since I’m not going to be able to stay ... may I take this all back with me?”

And he said, “You may take the answer to the first question back” — that was the one about sin — “but the answer to the second one you are not going to be able to remember.”

At that point, Jayne heard a sudden bang, like an electronic click in her ear, and her experience ended. Reflecting on it years afterward, she said:

I have never been able to remember those specific two or three sentences that I was told ... and I have tried and tried ... and I never could. But I think that I *do* know what he was telling me, even though I can’t recall the actual [words]. I know that it has to do with love and I believe it has to do with what I was enabled to see when he said, “What is in your heart?” and I looked inside myself and saw that I was perfect love.

Now, you know, that doesn’t apply just to me — that applies to all human beings. That is what we are. That is our core — this perfect love. And I believe that what it’s all about is [that] as we learn to bring *that* into our consciousness and have it remain there all the time — our connection with God — our consciousness of who we really are, I think that’s what the journey is. (Smith 1987)

In any event, following this kind of revelatory encounter, the individual is “sent back” or in some cases “chooses to return” to his physical body. And how does his otherworldly initiation change him? Anyone familiar with the now extensive NDE literature on this subject (e.g., Ring 1984; Grey 1985; Flynn 1986; Atwater 1988) will know that many NDErs return with apparently enhanced psychic sensitivities. Furthermore, quite a few (including Jayne) claim to have acquired healing gifts as a result of their NDE (as the NDE-based film, *Resurrection*, depicts), and most of them report an increased concern with the welfare of others and indeed with the welfare of all life on this planet.

Finally, I should note that though NDErs as a rule are more concerned with others, others may shy away from them. Many NDErs soon learn to their sorrow that a person who lives in two worlds — however one is initiated into a second world — tends to make “one-worlders” a trifle, if not distinctly, uncomfortable.

All in all, then, there seems to be a pretty good fit here between the shamanic initiation model and the structure of the NDE. These parallels, of course, are evident not just from the perspective of NDE research. Students of shamanism such as Harner (1987) and Kalweit (1988) have also drawn explicit connections between these two domains, and Kalweit’s book even gives pride of place to the NDE as a modern empirical exemplification of the timeless truths of the shamanic journey.

Nevertheless, a note of caution about these parallels is in order here. Specifically, by claiming that NDErs undergo a kind of shamanic initiation, I do *not* mean to imply that they are therefore fully accomplished shamans. On the contrary, they have simply received their *first* initiation; they have not “completed the course,” which for a shaman-to-be in a traditional society often takes years of effort. Therefore, while NDErs may return with some shamanic skills and something of a shamanic orientation, it would be best to view them as shamans-in-training, still learning their craft.

Turning now to UFO encounters, we need to discover how well our model fits the case of the typical abductee. Let’s review, then, in somewhat greater detail than before the usual progression of events in these experiences in an attempt to test the utility of this model here.

In UFO abductions, the individual is “taken” (and I don’t mean this in a physical sense, though abductees themselves sometimes do) when he is usually in some kind of an altered state of consciousness — asleep, in a state

of helpless paralysis, or otherwise somehow entranced. Here, however, the figure of the cosmic shaman — this time in the form of a space-age E.T., as it were, but playing the selfsame role albeit in new garb — may make his appearance early on, or the abductee may be brought into his presence by a set of clone-like assistants. The next stage of the journey is “the examination” in which the individual, already usually highly uneasy if not frightened to the core, is forced to endure a variety of intrusive procedures — apparently the UFO equivalent of the initiatory ordeal or dismemberment ceremony. It’s noteworthy, by the way, how often the abductee will say that this examination took place in a round or curved chamber. We know of course that a round hut or circular enclosure of some kind is a staple in traditional initiations, as Kannenberg (1986), herself a UFO abductee, has pointed out. Rotunda-like structures can be taken to symbolize a womb or a place of new beginnings. In any event, following this ordeal, certain specific — I suppose one might say “classified” — information may be imparted telepathically as part of another act in the initiatory drama. Eventually, however, the abductee is somehow returned to his ordinary space/time world, though, as I have said, he may not have any immediate conscious recall of his traumatic adventure.

Yet he, too, like the NDEr, may come back shaken from his experience but with the seeds of transformation already sown in his psyche. While there are, to my knowledge, no careful long-term studies of the aftereffects of these UFO encounters,<sup>3</sup> preliminary work by Sprinkle (1981, 1983), Davis (1985), and others (e.g., Decker 1986) suggests that despite the grueling nature of these experiences, the after-effects, though variable, often show striking resemblances to the characteristics of NDEs.

And once more in common with NDErs, the UFO abductee may learn that his experience, though it has conferred upon him certain new skills, insights, and understandings, has also served to isolate him somewhat from his community. Like the NDEr, he, too, has had his passport stamped with an extramundane imprint and returns from his strange sojourn with divided and complicated allegiances to that world. As a result, he may find that he is inwardly conflicted and frequently estranged from his family and fellows, something of an alien himself.

To illustrate the initiatory quality of these abduction experiences, let me give a synopsis of a famous case in the UFO literature, that of Betty Andreasson (Fowler 1979). In January 1967, Betty was abducted by several humanoid captors, including the leader of this group whose name was Quazgaa. In this archetypal drama, Quazgaa played the role of the cosmic shaman. Before being taken aboard a craft, Quazgaa gave Betty a “little thin blue book” — apparently a book of knowledge. (Unfortunately, sometime after Betty had been returned, she found that this book had mysteriously disappeared. “The vanishing artifact” is, of course, a familiar feature in folkloric tales.)

After getting aboard the craft, Betty was cleansed by immersion in a bright white light (seemingly, the UFO version of the ritual bath), asked to put on a white garment, taken to a room that she describes as rounded and domed, and then made to undergo a physical examination that hurt and frightened her. Later, she was taken through an enclosed corridor (that reminded her of a subway tunnel) and escorted through various realms: a scary red realm and a beautiful green one, both of which Betty was able to depict (she is an artist) in vivid detail.

Following these excursions came the culmination of Betty’s experience. She saw before her an incredible dazzling bright light in front of which there was an enormous bird. The bird was obviously alive and utterly real. As she approached the bird, the temperature became unbearably hot, and Betty, like a modern-day Dante, nearly fainted from the intensity of it. When she opened her eyes, the light was dimmed, the bird had vanished, and all she saw was a small fire that slowly turned to ashes, out of which, finally, emerged a gray worm.

Symbolically, of course, Betty encountered the unmistakable archetypal image of death-and-rebirth, the Phoenix. In any case, she next heard a voice saying that she had been chosen for a special mission, and now that she had seen, she would be sent back. Betty then returned but not before Quazgaa disclosed that he would be imparting certain special “formulas” to her.

All this comes from the first of two books written about Betty Andreasson — *The Andreasson Affair* by Raymond Fowler (1979) — and anyone who reads it cannot help but notice that it is chockfull of the symbolism of the initiation, a fact that several other commentators have pointed out (e.g., Kannenberg 1986; Rojcewicz 1986; Strieber 1987) and of which Betty herself seems aware (Fowler, 102).

What I've summarized here are, in effect, just a few strands from the rich tapestry of her initiation, but they are enough, I think, to indicate that such experiences do seem to conform quite well to our shamanic model. Here again, we see the elements of separation, the appearance of the cosmic shaman, dismemberment ordeals, death-and-rebirth motifs, esoteric knowledge, and the return to the physical world with a special sense of purpose. Betty, too, has been shamanized.

Before looking more closely at what precisely one is initiated *into* during these NDEs and UFOEs, I want to add a couple of comments about the characteristics of the cosmic shaman himself. First, it is clear from the literature of abduction cases that the appearance and behavior of the cosmic shaman in UFOEs tend to be disturbing and indeed frightening to most of those who encounter him. This is in marked contrast, of course, to the loving and benign qualities of the cosmic shaman in NDEs. Once more, it seems, we have an antipodal relationship between these two categories of experience at the *phenomenological* level but one that again obscures an important *functional* similarity. The point here is this: It doesn't matter what the cosmic shaman looks like or how he behaves. *His function is simply to educate the soul.* Whether he does this by acting out the role of the trickster, the masked demon, or the sage is irrelevant. His ways are protean, but his objective is the same through a thousand disguises. Second, as I've just implied, appearances may be deceiving, especially in the exotic mindscape of UFOEs. What I am alluding to here I will shortly tell.

### **Shamanic Initiations: Doorway To The *Mundus Imaginalis***

Given that NDEs and UFOEs may be forms of shamanic initiation, we must now take this inquiry one step further and ask: What is it that those who have these experiences are being initiated *into* when they pass through these otherworldly domains?

In my view, whenever an individual undergoes a shamanic journey — whether through nearly dying, UFO abduction, or by other means — he is vaulted into the world of the imagination or, to use Henry Corbin's (1976) equivalent phrase, a *mundus imaginalis*. Let me be clear at the outset what I understand by this expression, whether it be the English or the Latin. James Hillman (1975) has insisted, and NDErs and shamans everywhere would quickly concur, that in the world of imagination, persons and places are fully real; they are as real in that domain as our physical world is to our senses.<sup>4</sup> So in using this expression, I am not implying that such experiences are imaginary, but rather that they are *imaginal* (again to use Corbin's helpful term). Imagination in this sense is, as Coleridge argued, a creative power, and the world that it reveals is, as Blake knew, a supersensible reality that can be directly apprehended.

Shamans, who see with the eyes of their soul, have also penetrated into this world and have given us peerless descriptions of its fabulous and infinitely varied regions and denizens. Indeed, the idea that shamanic experiences thrust individuals into this realm has lately started to serve as a unifying formulation for a number of writers. For instance, in Shirley Nicholson's excellent anthology on shamanism (1987), there are quite a few articles that articulate this notion admirably (see, for example, the pieces by Harner, Houston, Achterberg, and Noll). Likewise, in Carol Zaleski's brilliant book, *Otherworld Journeys* (1987), she follows a similar interpretative line for NDEs. Finally, Terrence McKenna (1982, 1984), another student of shamanism, has also argued for the primacy of the imagination in understanding UFO phenomena. These collective efforts, centered on the imaginal world and the power of the imagination to shape human experience, may eventually spawn a conceptual net of sufficient breadth to capture and order meaningfully the variety of nonordinary experiences we considered at the beginning of this paper. At any rate, this approach appears to be a most promising direction for conceptual work in this area, and deserves even more attention.

All this notwithstanding, what is important for us at this point in our inquiry is not just the recent popularity of this kind of formulation but rather the fact that through it we are led all the way back to Heraclitus — the father of psychology — and the seeming priority of the soul. From this perspective, of course, NDEs, UFOEs, and shamanic journeys in general are all explorations in the domain of soul, which, as Heraclitus seems to have been the first to assert, is infinite.<sup>5</sup> And, as Roberts Avens (1980) has pointed out, soul is not only inseparable from imagination, "soul is imagination" (p. 103).

Therefore, if shamanic experiences are to educate the soul, as I have claimed, they must necessarily do this by propelling us into the infinitude of the human imagination. The *mundus imaginalis* is our true home, which we are once more beginning to see and to experience directly. Again, as Avens has said: “Only soul (the imaginal realm) is not reducible to anything else and so constitutes our true, ontological reality” (p. 102).

### Some Evolutionary Speculations

In my book *Heading Toward Omega* (Ring 1984), I argued that NDEs and other transcendental experiences may be serving as an evolutionary catalyst for humanity’s collective psychospiritual development. I still adhere to that view, but here I’d like to extend this thesis in a new direction. That direction has already been suggested in Michael Grosso’s *The Final Choice* (1985), where, in speaking of out-of-body experiences, he indicates that they “may represent the matrix for the *next environment* in the psychosocial evolution of man” (p. 102, his emphasis). I embrace that position, too, but would like to elaborate on it briefly.<sup>6</sup>

We now know that millions of persons have already had out-of-body experiences, NDEs, and other similar experiences (see, e.g., Rogo 1983; Gallup 1982; Hay 1982), and there are various reasons to suppose that their numbers have increased dramatically in recent years (e.g., Ferguson 1980; Russell 1983; Ring 1984). Likewise, the number of UFOEs — not just sightings — seems to be growing exponentially, too. Budd Hopkins (1987b), for example, estimates that there may be hundreds of thousands of such cases hidden among us. And shamanic journeys of one sort or another also seem to be increasingly common and commonly sought after in our contemporary world. Altogether, we seem to be undergoing a period of mushrooming growth in the occurrence of what Carol Zaleski has called “the otherworld journey” for which the traditional shaman has long been the prototype.

*If* this is actually so, might it be that what we are witnessing is the beginning stages in the *shamanizing of modern humanity*? And what *that* would mean is precisely this: that humanity would be finding its way back to its true home in the realm of the imagination, where it would be liberated to live in mythic time and would no longer be strictly bound to the prison of historical time. In short, I am suggesting that in this period of apparently accelerated psychospiritual evolution these two worlds may be drawing nearer to each other so that we, too, like the shaman, will be able easily to cross over and live in *both* worlds.

These are, to be sure, fairly extravagant extrapolations; indeed, I am acutely aware of how wildly inflated they may appear. At the same time, I take some measure of comfort from the fact that I am very far from being the first or only researcher to advance such evolutionary possibilities. Indeed, for investigators who have concerned themselves in recent years with NDEs, UFOEs, and similar phenomena, there have already been several who have put forward very similar ideas. Whitley Strieber, for example, whose implicit sympathy with shamanic interpretations of UFOEs is obvious in his book *Communion* (Strieber 1987), speculates toward its end that “the veil between matter and mind is now growing thin” (p. 289) and that the universe of “the visitors” and our own are “spinning each other together” (p. 295) in an act of cosmic communion. Keith Thompson, who has also recently articulated an initiation model for UFO encounters based on some of the ideas of Joseph Campbell and Arnold Von Gennep (Thompson 1988), has likewise found himself wondering whether

it’s possible that UFO’s, the near-death experience, apparitions of the Virgin Mary, and other shamanic visionary encounters are as much of a prod to our next level of consciousness as rapidly blooming sexual urges are a prod to a teenager’s move from childhood to adolescence. (p. 14)

Interestingly, Thompson’s ideas mirror almost exactly those expressed in Grosso’s *The Final Choice*, which considers in depth the collective evolutionary significance of precisely the phenomena that Thompson is concerned with. Similarly, Terence McKenna, who is certainly one of our most original and provocative visionary thinkers with a long-standing interest in the relationship between psychedelic shamanism and the UFO, has been eloquent in his insistence that we are coming to the end of historical time when, as he puts it, we will “live in hyperspace,” having “interiorized the body and exteriorized the soul,” and dwell in the realm of full imaginative possibility (McKenna 1982). Finally, English NDE researcher Margot Grey has also concluded from her studies that “the ever-increasing frequency of NDEs” is a direct reflection of an evolutionary trend that is propelling humanity toward

higher consciousness (Gray 1985), a hypothesis that is virtually identical to the one I offered in *Heading Toward Omega*, thus completing the circle (or should I say, the Ring?).

Of course, having company along the road doesn't necessarily mean one is walking in the right direction. None of us can see that far ahead in any case, but to me it is at least noteworthy that a number of thinkers — and I have listed only a small sample of them here — who have had occasion to ponder the implications of NDEs and UFOEs have felt that they point to some profound transformative possibilities for modern humanity and planetary culture.

While we are still in this speculative mode, however, let us just consider for a moment what we *would* experience as part of our soul's education *if* this evolutionary perspective does have any merit. In this context, I'd like to refer to a couple of experiences that were shared with me by friends — experiences that may contain some hints as to what our common realization might be.

Earlier I mentioned in connection with the role of the cosmic shaman in UFOEs that “appearances may be deceiving.” Here's the story that prompted that remark. A friend of mine, who has had an NDE, recently sent me a cassette tape in which she recounted a UFOE that had just happened to her. The circumstances were typical: she had awakened at 3:30 one morning and distinctly perceived an alien form by her bed. It had the appearance that is commonly described in the literature on abduction: small body, large head in relation to the torso, huge black eyes, and so forth. My friend then became aware that she was receiving a telepathic communication from this being, but what she heard served to reassure her.

She was told that the ugly, bug-like eyes (that so many abductees have reported) are not eyes at all — they are *shields*. The shields, she was further informed, are necessary to protect human beings from what they would otherwise be exposed to. This would overwhelm them. But just what is this dangerous force to which they would be exposed?

The being then allowed some of it “leak out.” My friend felt an influx of universal knowledge and infinite love pour into her. She was then told that “as we grow and as we raise in our level of understanding of what we *truly* are, more and more will be shown to us ... and we will receive all this knowledge and be able to be one with them.” Following this message, she felt another wave of that unconditional love NDErs so often speak of and fell peacefully asleep.

Such a story — even if it is *only* a story — makes us wonder what we would actually experience if we could look into the infinitude of those eyes. A possible answer comes from another NDEr friend of mine. This is a woman who, in 1975, while in her twenties, had three cardiac arrests within a period of four hours as a result of anaphylactic shock. During this time, she knew “with certitude” that she was dying. Her experiences during this life-threatening episode were extremely profound and revelatory, but here I have to confine myself just to one phase of her NDE that occurred toward its end.

At this point, she felt that she was “rocketing through layers upon layers of realities, seemingly to the heart of the universe itself,” and she was terrified. She thought she had gone too far and would be lost forever. Then:

Oh my God. I was “picked up” as if by an ENORMOUS pair of hands, and as I looked up I found myself looking into a gigantic EYE, out of which flowed a tear of all consuming, profound ineffable love and compassion, and I KNEW without a doubt, that I was looking into the heart of my self, who is all selves, whatever it is that God is. And I was brought into the EYE, and was home.

Let us hope that, lifted by the wings of a planet-wide initiation into the realm of transcendental experience, we will all be carried home to live again in the land of the soul — the Imagination.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bowing to the widespread use of the phrase “UFO encounter,” I will defer to it here, but I do want to state at the outset that I myself find this expression both misleading and unhelpful. In my judgment, what is “encountered” in these experiences has nothing to do with “unidentified flying objects” as we commonly understand this designation. Perhaps one benefit of attempting

to bring some conceptual coherence to the set of phenomena of which “UFO encounters” are one important category will be to rid ourselves of this unfortunate and somewhat embarrassing term, UFO.

<sup>2</sup> This is the most frequently used designation for this experience both in the popular literature on UFOs and in scholarly treatments of the phenomenon (e.g., Bullard 1987). It is, however, not favored by some of those who have had this kind of traumatic encounter. Strieber (1987), for example, prefers the expression “visitor experience” and has been emphatic in this rejection of any label for it that implies a sense of victimization (e.g., Strieber 1988).

<sup>3</sup> I have recently inaugurated a research project designed to provide data on this matter that will also afford a direct comparison between NDErs and UFOers on a variety of different measures.

<sup>4</sup> Thus Corbin: “It must be stressed that the world [of imagination] ... is perfectly *real*. Its reality is more irrefutable and more coherent than that of the empirical world, where *reality* is perceived by the senses” (p. 17, his emphasis).

<sup>5</sup> Fragment 42 in Wheelwright’s (1962) version reads: “You could not discover the limits of the soul, even if you traveled every road to do so; such is the depth of its meaning” (quoted in Avens 1980, 21).

<sup>6</sup> Since NDEs represent a specific form of OBE, Grosso’s argument can easily be extended to NDEs and to other similar transcendental experiences.

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