

**The Implications of Near-Death Experiences for Understanding Posttraumatic Growth**  
 Psychological Enquiry (Vol. 15, No. 1, 2004) Comment on piece by Tedeschi and Calhoun  
 also in this issue.

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At first reading, I was surprised and puzzled by the fact that Tedeschi and Calhoun's conceptual analysis of what they call posttraumatic growth contained not a single reference to the phenomenon that in recent decades has come to be widely known as near-death experience (NDE), wherein highly positive life changes are often reported by people who have in one way or another been snatched back from the very brink of death itself. On further reflection, however, it became evident that the undeniably impressive life improvements studied by Tedeschi and Calhoun were significantly different in kind from the change I underwent in 1983 when a medical team in Thailand resuscitated me – after a long struggle, from deep anoxic coma caused by potentially fatal opiate poisoning, a radical identity change that I have since found echoed in hundreds of other NDE reports from all around the world (Wren-Lewis, 1994, 1999; Wren-Lewis & Faraday, forthcoming). Moreover, the difference seems to me very important for the conceptual understanding of both NDEs and posttraumatic growth.

The contrast is epitomized in the word *trauma* itself, which is commonly associated in psychiatric circles with subsequent mental disorder or neurosis, as Tedeschi and Calhoun emphasize. In fact a key element in their presentation is insistence that even in cases where a severe crisis experience has led to very positive life change, this often coexists with continuing personal distress, sometimes even to the point where the experiencer says he or she would prefer it had not happened at all, despite having grown emotionally by living through it. (Rabbi Harold Kushner's widely known experience of having become a better rabbi by living through his son's terrible disability and death is cited as a classic example.) A key feature of NDEs, on the other hand, is the astonished experience of the body's dying as not unpleasant at all, still less a trauma – but rather transition to a far, far better thing than the experiencer has ever known or even imagined possible.

Most remarkable in this respect are those so-called out-of-body experiences (OBEs) wherein the experiencer seemingly floats out of a body that is highly traumatized in medical terms (e.g., in cardiac arrest or a serious traffic accident with multiple injuries) and views the whole affair, often including the extreme distress of loved ones, with complete equanimity that totally transcends ordinary human concern. In these accounts there is no hint of finding unexpected personal strength by a struggle against trauma, on which Tedeschi and Calhoun focus as a major factor in posttraumatic growth, nor is the OBE recalled after the event as anything remotely like a character-building ordeal, as the term *growth* suggests. It is sometimes spoken of as a kind of ecstasy in the basic meaning of that word, standing outside the self as hitherto perceived. The experiencer almost always loses all fear of death afterwards, giving a kind of literal fulfillment to Woody Allen's famous quip that he would not fear death at all if he did not have to be there at the time.

Dramatic OBEs of this kind figure in only a minority (albeit a substantial minority) of NDE accounts, but self-transcending consciousness of some kind, bringing freedom from suffering and anxiety, is the common factor in all the NDE descriptions that have come my way, many by direct personal testimony, many more from the now-extensive worldwide literature on the subject. (For abundantly referenced overviews of worldwide research on NDEs, see Zalesky, 1994 and Fox, 2003.) I myself experienced no OBE, and have no

memory at all of what happened between dozing off on a long-distance bus after eating a toffee offered me by the charming young man in the next seat (later identified from police records as a well-known thief) and waking up to find myself in a hospital ward several hours later with a doctor saying, "We really thought we'd lost you." In the next few hours, however, I gradually became aware of experiencing what I can only call a depth of meaning and beauty in everything, such as I had never known before in my nigh on 60 years of life, and the prospect of bodily death evoked no anxiety at all.

When I racked my brains to find words for this strange expanded mode of awareness, my prior research on the relations between science and religion threw up the term *eternity dimension*, which I later found echoed in the writings not only of several others who had experienced NDEs, but also of mystics all down the ages from across the spectrum of religious traditions worldwide. As I learned to live from this radically new perception in subsequent days, weeks, months, and years, I experienced many of the surprises cited by Tedeschi and Calhoun as typical results of posttraumatic growth, ranging from perceiving marvel in the texture of sidewalks to finding surprising new skill in coping with difficulties and feeling greater warmth toward people I would hitherto have found boring or irritating. For me, however, these new gifts did not feel at all like lessons I had somehow been taught by the crisis experience, as in the testimonies quoted by Tedeschi and Calhoun.

My feeling was much more like that of having been suddenly and instantaneously cured of something akin to a brain cataract that had obscured my perceptions for as long as I could remember. Far from seeming like a new and more spiritual stage in my personal development, the deepened consciousness felt more natural, almost more ordinary and obvious, than the life awareness had previously taken for granted for over half a century. This experience, reinforced by finding kindred statements in many other accounts of life after close encounter with death, has led me to embrace Maslow's (1971) transpersonal paradigm wherein a mystical dimension of consciousness is seen as the true norm of psychological health, and unawareness of such a dimension is evidence of unhealthy inhibition of human consciousness by unenlightened cultural conditioning.

With this paradigm, the positive life-changes following NDEs suggest that when the brain approaches the point of complete shutdown, the conditioned patterns of thought, feeling, and perception lose their grip on consciousness, allowing the eternity dimension to break through – a revelation that brings profound reorientation of life when the brain resumes working after resuscitation. Tedeschi and Calhoun come close to a kindred understanding of posttraumatic growth when they suggest that severe life crises may have positive results by virtue of shattering taken-for-granted assumptions about life, the world, and personal identity – but although they cite Maslow with approval as one of the "several clinicians and scientists" in the 20th century who recognized that life improvement can result from such "seismic" shaking of mental foundations, they stop short of an explicitly transpersonal paradigm.

This becomes evident in their emphasis on cases in which unexpected crisis situations shatter a formerly easygoing self-perception based on taken-for-granted optimistic assumptions that the world is a fairly safe, predictable, controllable place, thereby drawing out hitherto undiscovered strength for struggle against adversity. For me and many others who have been through NDEs, however, the resulting identity change has been precisely the opposite: mind-boggling discovery of oneness with an essentially benign inner reality underlying a world that had hitherto been superficially perceived as hostile, competitive, and red in tooth and claw. Far from being a sense of "dauntless human spirit," as described by one of Tedeschi and Calhoun's sources, the post-NDE feeling is one of being able to relax into everlasting arms at the core of existence (Wren-Lewis, 1992).

Moreover, in the decades since my opening to what I call eternity consciousness, NDE research has discovered that similar radical awakenings can occur without the kind of brain shutdown denoted by flat lines on monitors when the body comes to the brink of physical death. Such experiences, bringing lasting positive life changes, have been reported by people facing what seemed like certain death; in fact one of the very first serious studies in this area was made by a Swiss alpine climber named Albert Heim back in the 1890s. Heim fell off a high cliff, only to land on soft snow with very minor injuries. As he went down, time seemed to become infinitely extended, fear vanished, and he experienced wonderful colors and music, plus a panoramic review of his life right from childhood, with a sense that even his nastiest acts were then somehow accepted without being in any way whitewashed.

A scientist (geologist) by training and profession, Heim was moved to publish a scientific paper about his experience when he found it echoed by many other mountaineers, but this work was not translated into English until the 1970s, after Moody (1971, 1975) had begun to draw attention to NDEs experienced in clinical situations. By the 1990s, however, this kind of life change at the apparent brink of death had become sufficiently well-known to be made the subject of Peter Weir's widely acclaimed movie *Fearless*, in which it happens as a plane crashes – an experience so close to that of geology professor Sally Walker cited at the beginning of Tedeschi and Calhoun's article that I wonder if it was her experience that inspired the novel on which the film was based. From my Maslovian transpersonal perspective, such experiences seem to indicate that the well nigh universal social conditioning that shuts out the eternity dimension of consciousness can lose its grip not only when the brain is at the point of clinical close-down, but also when death seems certain and the body seems to have no future.

This leads me to hypothesize that at least some of the positive life changes that Tedeschi and Calhoun call posttraumatic growth involve just such a radical undermining of conditioned personal identity by a sense of "no future for me," rather than a gradual process of learning to cope with traumatic suffering. This would considerably reinforce their contention that assistance with cognitive processing is an essential part of providing support for trauma sufferers, and that hitherto unconsidered spiritual notions on the sufferer's part should no way be downplayed or dismissed as illusions. I would strongly demur, however, from their embrace of traditional religious notions about the transformative power of suffering, which all too often translate into puritanical disciplines wherein unpleasantness is deliberately imposed (or even self-imposed) in the belief that it is necessary for spiritual development.

My own continuing day-by-day (and night-by-night) eternity experience since 1983 disproves the common religious assumption that such consciousness is a very high state to be achieved only by a long struggle of spiritual practice and purification. In fact, my experience and research suggests that this assumption is part of the very mindset that has kept humanity in general locked into the petty, pace of time (with very low life satisfaction) for most of its history. My conclusion from the evidence of NDEs (Wren-Lewis, 1994; Wren-Lewis & Faraday, forthcoming) is that the conditioning which blocks out the truly natural human condition of eternity consciousness is something like a hyperactivity of the mind's survival programs passed on by conditioning from one generation to the next, and puritanical spirituality can only reinforce that hyperactivity.

It is no doubt for this reason that many people have hailed the growing number of NDEs made possible by modern medical advances as the advent of a new kind of spirituality free from the "no pain, no gain" ethic so dominant in traditional religions. For myself, I would see it as possibly nothing less than the advent of a spirituality freed from what the prophetic

poet William Blake called the age-old takeover of spirituality by Satan, "the God of This World."

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