

Preface

Have you ever looked around one day to find that you were doing something you never imagined you'd be doing? Something you could never have foreseen in your wildest imagination? That's how I feel writing this book about things that no one wants to talk about, inspired by experiences I never dreamt of having. Experiences that no one in their right mind would ever want to have.

Then what could possibly compel me try to write a positive book about the one ultimate, undeniably negative experience in life—that is, the apparent end of it? How could a person ever become so easy, and even downright encouraging, about such an ominous and always-to-be-avoided subject as *dying*—much less speak with any authority about the one experience for which there's obviously so little first-hand expertise available? The answers to these questions might come more easily if I happened to be someone who'd had one of those remarkable Near Death (after-life) Experiences—and, not coincidentally, I am. In fact, as crazy as it sounds, I've had *three* of them.

Like a lot of people, I had my difficulties accepting all those Near Death Experience stories, until it happened to me—and then, oddly enough, even after it happened to me. For some deep-seated reason, I apparently couldn't face the powerful significance of my experiences; so, for years afterward, I kept pretending I was an agnostic concerning the critical questions of life and death, even though, in a very real way, I knew better. Even though my life had plainly and very painfully demonstrated a deeper truth to me over and over . . . and *over*.

I'm still not sure why it took such a long time to open up my mind to the truth imprisoned inside of me, to let it out and allow the fullness of it to start shaping my life. I guess it took whatever it took for me finally to become willing to look back at those experiences, accept them, *own* them, realize the truths that came out of each, and then try to live within the lessons they'd taught me about Life—based on what they'd taught me about death.

If you are a doubter, as I was, consider this: Of the now millions of people who, down through the ages, have claimed to have had an experience of *life after life*, thousands of the more recent cases have been very well documented. There are lots of very credible academic collections of case studies by extraordinarily well-qualified and dedicated experts like Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Kenneth Ring, or Raymond Moody—and a host of others, if you're curious. Most of these cases have had so much in common with one another that they're clearly not just describing coincidental unconscious states a few survivors have reported, but what

seem to be profound non-physical universal experiences that have been shared by so many people that they can be grouped into different distinct categories, levels, and types. So this isn't just some kind of urban legend we're exploring here. It's a bona fide human phenomenon—a real aspect of Life that's very possibly the opening experience of what happens when we make the transition we call dying.

As survivors of these experiences, are we all just a bunch of crackpots? Well, that would make for an awful lot of crackpots (always a distinct possibility). Are we all describing an actual passage into an extra-dimensional world that follows right on the heels of this one, or, as some would suggest, merely a complex set of vivid biochemical responses that everyone experiences as our common human form shuts itself down?

I don't think it matters much really, in cases like these. I know those suggestions don't bother me. I'm comfortably assured about the authenticity of my own vivid biochemical experiences and, in keeping with the testimony of all those other survivors, I know that something *more* definitely happens beyond this life, in a conscious world that's very different from, but just as real as, this one. Something that amounts to a continuation, a progression that we flow into seamlessly, immediately after we pass on from this world we think we know so well.

In light of all those people who've claimed to have had dramatic experiences beyond this life—who've supposedly died and then miraculously come back—my experiences didn't seem to me all that dramatic or miraculous. But

that's kind of silly, isn't it? After all, they had to have been a little bit miraculous. So I do consider myself a member of that unusual club—perhaps even kind of a special member because, as I mentioned, I've actually had three such experiences in my life, of differing types. One of them was a momentary set of moving, dreamlike images; one was more grave—a struggle of sorts that took place over a number of hours; and one, my first and most profound of all, lasted a full day and apparently sent me off into an altogether different dimension of being.

I hope that I don't have any more such traumatic experiences for a good, long while—at least not until I'm really ready. Those three will do just fine for me, for the time being. I don't say that because the results of those transitions were all that terrible; in fact, they were mostly the opposite—after all, I'm still here to talk about them. It's just that the circumstances leading up to these experiences weren't what you'd consider a walk in the park—but then, I wouldn't expect that the circumstances leading up to Near Death Experiences ever are. Besides, it really isn't the sensations of nearly dying that I want to focus on at all; it's the way I think about life with a more complete understanding, from a perspective that came about as the result of those three extreme experiences. Perceptions change profoundly for anyone who has experienced the death of any loved one first hand—especially when it's his or her *own death*.

At different points in this book, I'll describe each of the incidents in my life as clearly as I can actually remember, without allowing my imagination to fill in what may be

invented details. If you're looking for wondrous and fantastic descriptions of the afterlife, you won't really find them here. Because, while I respect and honor the more elaborate memories to which other survivors may bear witness, what I have held on to in the wake of death is the sense of a simpler wholeness and the belief that attempts to describe what the "afterlife" really is (including the little bit of it that I experienced) may be just the wishful machinations of our minds. Some reports may be more ecstatic, some more punitive; but how greatly they differ from one another suggests to me that they are creations of an individual nature. Despite how compelling many of them are, they may also simply be projections of our personal mentalities, imaginative obstacles of our strictly human nature that come between us and a greater reality.

My intention here is to try to share with you the benefits of what I've learned in a fairly direct and simple way—to avoid any effort to describe an indescribably different reality using the language and myth of our shared human reality. Believe me, there's already more than enough magic to go around.

Before and between these three experiences, I lived what might be called an interesting life. A rough childhood, punctuated by the deaths of all my grandparents by age twelve, and all of my aunts and uncles by my twenties. Most of them (my favorite aunt, Ruth, in particular) were lively, very funny people—mentors and protectors who showed me how a little well-placed humor could help to ease me through the difficult circumstances I'd been handed as a

kid. Then it seemed they were suddenly all gone. I felt the foundations had slipped from under me.

In high school, I had wanted to be a doctor, but my first day of volunteering in a hospital gave me such a harsh introduction to the realities of mortality that I had to reconsider. On top of that, two young women with whom I was in relationships died early, tragic deaths. As a young person, deeply shaken by all that finality, I was at best full of questions about life and death and, at worst, full of cynical answers.

So I was always a roamer. I moved around a lot, restless and discontent, looking for something. Then, in an effort to “fix it,” to find some meaning to my life, I got married at a very young age to another troubled young soul like myself. Naturally it didn’t work. After seven years of marriage, my wife and I detached ourselves from our typical lives and started roaming together, traveling around the world for a year. Upon our return to America to resume our *normal* lives, I was suddenly and unexpectedly called to the bedside of my beloved Aunt Ruth, in time to witness the actual moment of her incomprehensibly unnecessary death, caused by malpractice.

Something happened to me then. From that point on, I just couldn’t seem to gain a healthy purchase on life, despite outside appearances to the contrary. I became a bit unhinged in a way. My marriage ended, and I was cast off into an increasingly dangerous and destructive life that didn’t lack for accomplishment or “success,” but that wasn’t satisfying or fulfilling in any real way—just aching driven by

skewed instincts. It took me many years of confusion—years of often unintentional survival (or of compassionate Providence)—to at last reach a moment of personal rebirth and transformation when I finally realized the much more comfortable way that Life had been showing me all along—the way to truly *live*.

I'd had to make a lot of hard choices, many of which I'd gladly take back if I could, in the course of searching without knowing what for. I'm sad to say that it was not a particularly conscious life I led, but rather one that repeatedly forced me to confront a succession of “unfair” consequences and injuries, including these experiences of a not-so-final end that I'd now like to share with you.

Since my two later Near Death Experiences weren't as lucid or transformative as the very first one, let me tell you about that one to start with. After all, it's the story that has profoundly, if sometimes unconsciously, underscored a good deal of the rest of my life, and it is what ultimately compelled me to set down all the ideas in this book. The understanding I have to offer you comes from these three stories, and this is the first of them.

I was in my mid-twenties, many years ago now. As I was prone to do as a young man, I was working way too much—maybe a hundred hours a week at two jobs. I always needed to keep my mind occupied back then, or I'd start feeling overwhelmed by worries and expectations. I always needed to feel as if I were going somewhere, getting somewhere; being where I was never felt like enough. My world seemed so intensely important to me at the time that I just plain

overdid it and was badly “burned out”—a common enough malady at any time in our crazy culture.

My wife was taking a flight to visit her aunt, so I drove her to the airport late one afternoon. On the way home, at the end of another very long day, I passed an exotic-looking cocktail lounge that I’d passed before. It was one of those elaborate tiki-themed holdovers from the Sixties, with a lacquered bamboo façade and flickering torches that apparently proved irresistible. I’ve always loved that stuff. I stopped in for a cocktail, thinking: What could it hurt? I guess I didn’t think it would hurt one bit, and so I unconsciously rewarded myself for all of my recent work and worry. But, as wrung-out as I was, I’m sure the two tall, exotic drinks I had contributed in no small measure to the tragedy, or near-tragedy, that followed.

Driving home as it approached darkness, I turned down an unfamiliar street that I imagined to be a straight and easy shortcut home. I was going about thirty-five or forty miles an hour when something happened that you don’t see all too often anymore. My car stereo *ate* the cassette tape that I was playing, making that bloopy, robotic sound that we used to dread in those days. I’m sure those kinds of small equipment issues are common causes of single-car accidents, and so it definitely was in my case. The very last “real” thing I remember was pulling the cassette out—a long, fettucine-like strand of tape snagged in the tape player’s mechanism—and then suddenly *the lights went out*.

The next thing I knew, the very next instant, I was near the top of a telephone pole, looking down over the street

below. Right next to me was a bright white streetlight illuminating the scene, a couple of moths circling frantically around it. There beneath me was the car I had been driving, seriously smashed into that same telephone pole, front end caved in, hood crumpled and popped open, and steam roiling up into the light. There was hissing and pinging, and I heard voices and saw lights snap on in the neighborhood houses. People began running out to see what had happened. I heard them crying out with alarm, calling back to their houses to get help. “Get an ambulance; this looks bad!” someone yelled out.

I tried to get their attention, to tell them I was fine and that they didn’t need to worry, but from where I stood (or sort of floated), they were all busily behaving as if there were a real emergency going on. And besides, it seemed as if no one down there could see me or hear me anyway.

The windshield was smashed outward in one of those big tempered-glass spider-web shapes, and there was someone’s arm hanging out of the open window, with the other arm looped through the mangled steering wheel. I couldn’t quite see the victim’s face from where I was, but I knew who it was down there below, motionless. Hot water poured out of the fractured radiator and ran into the dark fluid on the ground that I suspected was blood—that I realized, in fact, was *my* blood.

But the whole time, I was actually just fine—in fact, *better* than fine, up there floating just above all the activity. There was absolutely no pain, just a profound sensation of comfort and ease—and no sense of time at all, or of gravity.

Then the ambulance arrived. People described to the police what they'd heard and seen. I eavesdropped up above them a little bit, but had a little trouble focusing on what they were saying. And then it was time for me to go.

I was not alone. I knew that I had been joined by a benevolent presence, positioned just out of view, a little above and to the left behind me. The presence began prompting me to move along, and gently shepherded me out over the scene, away into what I can only describe as a bank of soft, gray cotton-wool fog of sorts. The action beneath me diminished, like a film fading out. I was light—weightless, warm, and very comfortable—and I felt completely free and at peace, a feeling I'd never experienced before then, and only in little bits since.

Then I remember being in a place that seemed lovely—perhaps a bit pastoral and indistinct, but altogether very agreeable. I was engaged in a pleasant but quite serious conversation of sorts. Though I don't really remember the content of it, or even actually speaking out loud, I have always felt it was a long, intense session that I wasn't supposed to remember in its entirety—a conversation in which lots of very important things got hashed out. It carried on pleasantly, in an easy, slightly business-like manner for an indefinable time, like a familiar kind of interview. Then it ended.

That was all I remember of that period, which, as it happened, turned out to be about eighteen hours in actual physical time. I regained consciousness briefly once, as I was being moved from one hospital to another to take advantage of the University plastic surgeon's residency there, but I

soon slipped back into unconsciousness for what turned out to be a much longer time than I'd thought.

Sadly, that nice little car was a total loss. I'd caved the steering wheel into a whacky loop with my face and smashed the windshield with my head, despite having had my shoulder harness on . . . so naturally I was not in such good shape either. Finally, late the next day, I returned to consciousness, alone in a quiet hospital room. I had quite a severe concussion, but otherwise the prognosis was good, all things considered. I knew there was some other way I'd been changed, however, although I couldn't really see how yet. I just wished it had never happened. I did know that I had a slightly different face and a serious, heartfelt apology to make to my wife. It was actually her car that I'd wrecked.

A couple of days later, I returned to the accident scene, my head still all bandaged up, and examined what I thought I had seen—what I could only have seen from my vantage point up by the streetlight. I surveyed the areas behind hedges and around the sides of the houses, and checked the angles up and down to the crash site. Everything I couldn't see from the ground *was just as I had seen it* from my place up near the top of the telephone pole—the shape of the street light, side doors and trash cans, back fences, and the like. It all checked out.

Of course the obvious lesson I learned right away was: Don't drink and drive at all, ever. And always drive as if your life depended on it, because it does. Even if you think you're plenty sober, you may not be quite sober enough. It's not all up to your best judgment. There are a lot of converg-

ing dynamic forces we are constantly subject to when we drive, just as when we live.

As I mentioned before, for some reason it actually took many more years for me to open up to the deeper meaning that this experience eventually brought to life inside of me. I apparently suppressed the incident—part of some kind of psychic self-defense, I suppose—until a number of years later, after my two other brushes with death had occurred.

Eventually, the meaning and power of these experiences began to percolate—to rise up and spread through me—and then began slowly, undeniably to inform (and re-form) my life from the inside out. It seems I had to be broken open over and over again by Life, physically and psychically, until the meaning of those memories crystallized within me and a conversion of sorts could take place. And then I came to know with absolute certainty the lesson of that first experience with mortality: that *I am a spiritual being having a physical life experience*, and that our actual transition from this life to the next (and possibly from the former) is seamless, relatively painless, and full of warmth, assurance, and ease . . . as I now believe most of Life is actually meant to be.

Unfortunately though, I did have to be there when it happened.

So, that's my opening story. I hope it tells you a little something about what's motivating me, and how I came to my cautiously positive view of what's generally considered to be the ultimate not-so-positive experience of our lives. It didn't come easily, and I most certainly don't recommend

such violent and dramatic means as what occurred to me in this and my other two stories.

I suppose one of my goals is to spare you the extremes I went through to gain the simple understandings that I've acquired about life and change and pain and loss—and particularly about death, which, as I found out for myself, is most definitely *not* an ending, but instead a compelling and miraculous passage. On the other side of the same coin, I've gained a rather unique perspective on the nature of Life that I think may have helped me discover some very practical sources of wholeness and happiness with a clarity that I would never have considered possible before. A really good, hard kick in the pants can do that for you.

What slim authority I may have to tackle some of the bigger-than-life themes I hope to address in this book comes only from having been there myself. All the observations and advice I'll give you are based on the particularly hard-to-come-by information my life has given me—advice which, while sincerely offered, doesn't necessarily mean I'm right about everything. I learned some hard lessons by definitely having wandered down *the road best not taken* a few too many times. I only hope the recognition of these imperfections will help to validate the practicality and sincerity of my suggestions. You can learn a lot by getting it wrong.

There may also be a number of moments when you'll find yourself thinking: "That's easy for him to say." Most likely, however, they'll be the moments when it's not.

While this may not be a book for the already-convinced, as it were—that is, for avid followers of established religious

or other spiritual conclusions—I do believe there’s something important here for everyone. If you already have your beliefs well in place, and are comfortable with them where they are, my hat is off to you. I only ask that you keep an open mind. Though I won’t be dealing with questions of religion, inevitably a good deal of my life-and-death experiences will cross over into that territory—territory that, from my perspective, is shared by everyone, no matter where they come from or what they believe. What I’ve drawn from Life and death doesn’t discriminate; everyone is welcome.

I apologize ahead of time that this book is not at all about the legalities of anything. There’s no discussion of wills or estates or taxes or insurance policies—nothing like that here. When it comes to your dying, I do recommend that you keep honest and current with the serious legal affairs that affect your partners in life; take care of all the arrangements that are important to everyone surviving you. You wouldn’t want to drop the complications of an entire life into the lap of an unsuspecting loved one, or to have your intentions completely misunderstood after you’re gone (or especially while you’re still here). I’m not at all qualified to give you advice about your legal affairs—not in the same way that I’m qualified to talk about finding happiness, or how to make things a bit more right, or how to get beaten up and still bounce back. This is a little different kind of *how-to* book.

You may find my inadvertently earned resilience sometimes comes off as a bit too direct. Getting past the rough

stuff has simplified my life that way. This is simply meant to be a book about what you can do in this life to help you along the way with some grace, some ease, and maybe some fun—and to help you look forward to and prepare for what may very well be coming next. One of the central beliefs that I'll return to over and over comes from the old adage: Life doesn't happen to you; it happens *for you*. To take that a bit further, as I hope to do, I believe the same most certainly holds true for death.

Since it was the quality with which I lived my life that definitively influenced not just the ways in which I left it, but also what I carried along with me into “that undiscover'd country,” you'll find that a lot of what's here isn't so much about dying as it is about living *well*—that is, the approaches and preparations that will make for an easier today and tomorrow, and so ever after too. Since I believe that dying really *is living as well*, this is actually a single-purpose primer of sorts, informed by the experiences of someone who has (unintentionally) done a little bit of each.

So please bear with me if I ever seem flippant. I'm not really. I take my dying (and anyone else's) deadly seriously. It's just that, in order to negotiate this mortal roller coaster, I believe that you need to have a sense of humor about *everything*—including death, taxes, and, in my own case, “skinheads” and crocodiles.

Especially crocodiles.

All of us have stood on the edge of a vast starry sky, gazed at the moon, and wondered: Just what in the heck is really going on here? I can tell you from my experiences that

what we normally consider to be “the end” is more than likely the passageway into a world where all the answers to those previously unanswerable questions can be found. A world that’s formed, in part anyway, by the experiences, the understanding, and the life that we carry along into it.

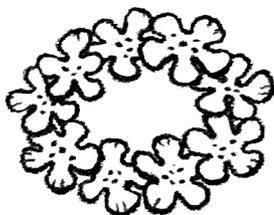
You see, it really isn’t about dying; it’s about living *more* Life, where Life is a long trip that doesn’t quite stop at death.

So then, if I may, I’d like to take you on a little adventure into it, around it, and *through* it—if you can spare me just a bit of your precious time and give me the benefit of whatever doubts you may still have.

And away we go . . .



An Introduction to Aloha— Saying Hello and Goodbye



The opening quote from Woody Allen pretty much sums up what many of us really think about dying—when we actually get around to thinking about it, that is. It is, after all, inevitable, and actually happening all around us all the time, but who in their right mind wants to dwell on it? It's the one thing that everybody does, and that everybody wants to do as easily, as painlessly, and as well as possible. But since we seldom discuss just how it is that you go

about doing that, it seems as if dying may be a good place to start for a change.

Chances are that as you get older—or if you’re just a soul with a questioning nature—you may find yourself coming to a point where avoiding the subject of death seems a little immature, or even superstitious. This is the point at which you may want to forget whatever taboos there are, and just talk about it for a change. Maybe even to do a little investigation of the personal and cultural attitudes that make us feel so much fear about what’s really such a commonplace and unavoidable occurrence, without all the mandatory doom and gloom.

Could it be that we avoid it because we feel as if it’s always too soon to consider what we still may have to make up for? All that rich potential lost, or repentance yet to seek? Or maybe we fear we’ll never be able to produce enough character—that we won’t be able to summon up what it takes to help a loved one when the time comes, or to meet that daunting challenge ourselves. Is it mostly just the *pain* that we’re afraid of? That seems like a reasonable enough concern to me, all right. Like most folks, I am only in favor of pain philosophically—as an unavoidable, strictly temporary learning device, that is.

Believe me, I had never planned on personally investigating the nature of death. Like most of us, however, I didn’t have much choice in the matter, or I would have chosen “Not now, thanks” of course. Then, when I discovered for myself that it all appears to be part of the same big process—that dying *is living* and living *is dying*—I began to

develop a perspective of continuity and a kind of strategy that could help me in living *this* life. Suddenly, I began to see how that perspective can give us an entirely different, easier, and more relaxed attitude toward the whole subject.

What I'm getting at is that this conversation doesn't need to be nearly as bad as it sounds—although it does sound pretty bad, I'll grant you that. The fact is that I'm (obviously) always quite happy to talk about death nowadays, although I've found I do need to be a little bit careful about when and where I do that. For example, a birthday dinner for an in-law is usually not the right time; likewise, it can be a pretty tough sell around people who are particularly sensitive, dramatic, or terribly fearful about death. Most folks need to be sensibly pragmatic and open or spiritually fit and ready—or *both*—to be willing to enter into any kind of self-examination, particularly when it is of such a traditionally delicate nature.

With those people for whom a death is a recent or more imminently approaching fact, please join the conversation only if you're comfortable with it. And even if you're not entirely comfortable, keep in mind that this is intended to be a much more positive, much less morbid, and (since the two are not exclusive) more realistic and even *magical* conversation than any other you'll ever hear on the subject. Along with the unavoidable hard parts, I'll be trying to address death as an enlivening, extra-dimensional right of passage from a point of view that admittedly may seem a little loosely wound to you at first.

So let me try to ground the discussion in the obvious from the get-go.

Obviously, dying is happening to everybody you've ever heard of, and everybody you've never heard of. You, me, everyone you've ever known or will ever know. It's a process that's happening on slightly different schedules to everyone living, all the time. In fact, there are about a zillion people, from the most famous to the not-at-all-famous, who have made this simple transition during our lifetimes, or are making it *right at this very moment*. It is a constant, regular, ongoing fact of life we will all get to know. On that grander scale, it's really not such a big deal. On the scale of you and me, it really is a pretty big deal.

Of course, just living itself brings up plenty of those less-than-entirely comfortable questions, doesn't it? Some we eventually get good answers to, some we don't. Questions like: Why am I here? Why are we here? What is this really all about? Or: What happens to us when we die? Where do we go? And most important for the purposes of this book: Is there a really good way to go about living to prepare for our "end" and what comes next? Could there possibly be any *good* way to die? It seems clear that some people definitely do have "better," more satisfactory deaths than others. So, how can we make the whole process easier, in a way that will hopefully provide us with the best, well . . . results?

These are serious questions you may ask that deserve to be asked, and discussed, and even answered—if at all humanly possible.

We'll have to start somewhere if we want to make sense of all these elusive mysteries, struggles, and strategies of (living and) dying. The goal is to deflate our unavoidable

fears vigorously and rationally, and to try to supply some good answers about just what is going on here and what it all entails—right up until we go—as well as how we may even want to go about it in the best fashion possible. How do we get ready for “the end,” even if, God forbid, it happens to be tomorrow? And after all, who knows?

My own unexpected Near Death Experiences (NDEs for short) put everything in a new context for me, and made me replace a lot of our common assumptions about dying and about preparing for death—all those typically solemn considerations, attitudes, and arrangements that supposedly must be observed, but that don’t really have all that much to do with what’s happening here and now. As death is part of a continuing cycle of Life, our approach has to be more about where we are in this life in every moment, and so where we *will be*—especially if we find our time is suddenly a lot shorter than we had expected it to be. Or especially if it’s not.

I realized it all required adopting a different perspective, one that included not only my brief views from the other side, but also a somewhat radically different approach to living life in general. I say somewhat because, for many people, nothing I suggest will seem like a stretch at all. For others, however, it may seem very radical indeed, and it will need to be to break open the old frozen status quo and force the creation of a more practical and effective way to live. For me, it meant embracing the new reality I’d been given by revising some basic fears and assumptions I’d had about death—and, less obviously, about life as well.

For example, consider this twist, if you will: As scary as dying may seem to us, it really isn't as scary as being born. It just doesn't feel that way because we have so much time to think about dying. But consider, if you will, all the momentous determinations that are happening to us when we're being born. Didn't you ever wonder why most babies come into this world screaming and crying with such heartfelt conviction? What do they know that we seem to have forgotten? A doctor may suggest that it's just because they need to start their lungs functioning, but couldn't that be done just as well by laughing hilariously? You don't see that very often, do you? Babies laughing out loud when they're born? Not nearly as often as you see a seasoned old soul calmly and blissfully "passing away."

Or just imagine being a teenager; return to the mental state you were in then. I dare you. Some folks may relish the opportunity. I would personally find it absolutely terrifying—like driving a race car with no steering. That's one thing I feel Life got totally backward. It would be fine if old age and death came along before you'd learned all that much about Life, but wouldn't it have been nice to have had a little more preparation for being a teenager? To have known a good deal more about Life and all its romantic ramifications *prior* to the onset of so momentous a challenge as *puberty*? After all, it is an awful lot for a relative newcomer to have to deal with.

Since it's likely that nothing ahead can be all that much worse than the scariest parts of life that you've gotten through already, and since most of us have suffered plenty

of serious slings and arrows and experienced our fair share of *fear* by now, you needn't be afraid of how to handle an uncertain future, or of leaving unfinished business behind. Those are issues that can be addressed fairly easily in a few simple steps. So, since it is probably always "downhill from here" in any number of ways, you can know with assurance in your heart that many of the hardest parts of your life are already behind you. There's always going to be a couple of somewhat difficult bumps in the road ahead, but not like anything you haven't seen before in one form or another. The same themes simply recur in a slightly different arrangement. It may look like new territory because you haven't been through that specific experience yet. But still, it's all in the course of *Life* with all its very familiar complications.

Dealing with the death that's in all of our futures appears to be the one really difficult commitment we all share, because it seems so frighteningly different from anything else in our lives. But what I'm saying is that *it isn't*. When it happened to me, it actually felt very familiar. And unlike many of the difficult situations I've had to meet in my life, once I was into it, it was not hard at all. It was very easy and surprisingly comfortable. Mind you, it was still an unexpected challenge, but not at all as bad as many of life's continuing difficulties can be—like going to court or having oral surgery, for example. In fact, dying felt like a substantial relief, and I didn't really even have much of anything wrong with me. Two out of the three times, I was perfectly healthy. In fact, my life was not-so-bad to quite good. But

even at that, “dying” felt like having a big weight removed from my shoulders.

So, while we all know theoretically that dying is a relief—even “liberating,” so to speak (especially if you’re suffering)—it’s still not something we want to do. Naturally, we all want to live. But one thing I do want to suggest strongly is this: Compared to some things, death is not nearly as bad as you may think it is.

It won’t be easy, and it will be sad, and it will inspire painful feelings of powerlessness and loss. In short, it’s certainly nobody’s idea of a good time. But if we can just agree that much of Life definitely *is* a good time, and if dying is really just a particularly difficult part of living, then we can try considering all of the things that have made the difficult parts of life more bearable, even enriching. Many of the same realizations, approaches, and principles that have seen us through the hard times before and made life happier and more fulfilling will work the same way for us as we navigate through our most careful and mysterious challenges. Maybe there’s a little of that *real* magic that can help us out too.



Why Me— and Everybody Else?



It's hard not to take it personally. The “terminally unique” aspect of dying seems pretty well justified. It really doesn't matter how many people do it; it's still just happening to you, or to me, or to someone we care about. And there is an inevitable sense of unfairness to the ending of anything we cherish. Especially *life*, and especially if it seems to be ending before its time. Or not.

Since we're all part of this same mysterious system, there's a frequently asked question that could be posed

by any of us at either end of life, in hopes that we'd get some kind of an answer: Why? *Why me*—here and now? Why is this whole crazy mechanism wound up the way it is, allowed to collect all that speed and momentum, and then left to fall apart slowly and shut down? Or to end with some totally inappropriate unforeseeable abruptness? What is that all about?

Well, my NDEs all pointed me to three simple possibilities really: *expression*, *evolution*, and *Love*.

Not expression—as in having to do something brilliant or in some way to become hugely important—but *expression*—as in finding out who you really are and being *that*. Finding your true, authentic self, and what real meaning your life is meant to have—even if it's “only” to you, or “only” to be there for somebody else—and finding the positive nature of that self-expression, whatever it may be.

I don't mean evolution as in “the theory of,” but instead *evolution* as in the process of evolving *spiritually*—that personal and collective motivation to keep growing and expanding above and beyond all the day-to-day stuff, right on through this life to whatever comes next. To rise above the human noise and find a path to our higher selves through a realization of the Eternal that is our real nature.

I don't mean love as simple sentimentality, but rather *Love* as the most powerful underlying energy and strategy for living, and for all Life—as the single most effective counteractive force to the subconscious self-sabotage that can be active in each of us, and in our society. Simply put, I mean Love as being the true medium of Life.

Absolutely everything, including ourselves and everything around us, is, in one way or another, an expression of the magical consciousness that energizes everything that exists. I'm sorry to get magical on you so soon, but I for one don't see how it can be avoided while we're all *sitting on a planet in outer space*. We've all seen the wonderful, mysterious, provocative, sometimes ghastly things that the world can be. We all know the delightfully indescribable beauty of nature or childhood, and the senseless horrors of inhumanity and environmental degradation. We've all been amazed by the remarkable ingenuity of our man-made wonders. For the most part, this does appear to be a world of reason, with reasonable explanations for everything. Or at least it's comfortable to think so.

But what about the way the moon just hangs in the sky like a shiny dime, when we all know that it's really a massive ball of cheese? Answer me that. Even “the empirical truth” of it all, even *science*, is nothing if not a magic act—first convincing us that we know exactly what the world is, and then suddenly changing what “exactly” is right in front of our eyes, over and over and over again. Our science has gotten very good at describing the vastness of time and space, and the incomprehensibly tiny world of molecules and sub-atomic particles and the like, but everything in between is made up from millions of years of shared, unfathomable consciousness, and can only really be described consistently by mystics, poets, artists, children, or others who are, on occasion, considered to be completely out of their minds.

We're swimming in this magic always, from our opening cry to our closing sigh. And here we all are, just this one little point, this smudge, this rocket burst that is *I Am*. The flower at the end of this particular stem. I'm just a dad or a sister or a friend. I'm this building, this concerto, this register ringing, this real estate deal, *this book*. That's what I am meant to express—this one little piece, or part, of Life. Seven billion little pieces of everything, and counting.

As for the reason . . . well, it's an *evolution* that we're taking part in. Personally and collectively. An evolution of the larger spiritual expression that all Creation seems to be—as much as we can know from the little bit of it we can perceive, which apparently isn't all that much. But even from that little bit, it appears that everything, including you and yours truly, is growing along its own line toward a kind of perfection, or apparent demise (or transformation)—which is a kind of perfection in itself, because it contributes perfectly to the continuity and expression of everything that came before, and everything that will follow.

Just as when you leave that house you lived in for so long and new people move in and fix it up, or nobody does and it gets knocked down and they put in a new office or a museum or a public garden. Then it becomes a new part of the world, just for now. Or you leave your business to your son, so that maybe he'll carry on and define his life with it in the same way that you did; but then he sells it and becomes a massage therapist or a cartoonist—as he always wanted to be. Then that little change becomes another new

part of the world as well. The last leaf left from the autumn is pushed out by the new growth in spring, and new flowers blossom into being, and even the world is constantly blossoming into its new self.

So we're compelled to ask: Why? Well, it's pretty simple, as big explanations go—so you can blossom and become yourself. So you can learn to be your true, timeless (possibly even *interdimensional*) self—separate from cultural and material superficialities. So you can learn to contribute to life, to participate in the cycle of Love and creation and growth that reaches across life, across time. In short, so you can learn what you can contribute and how you can evolve personally and spiritually—and in those ways, to play your part in the evolution of everything. So death, too, is really one of your ultimate contributions—a transition into your next divine expression.

What if you're facing death—your own or that of someone you love—and it seems to have arrived much sooner than it should? Isn't there an irrefutable injustice in that? Yes, there may be; but Life's sense of justice has invisible roots. It may seem that there hasn't been a real chance yet for enough evolution and expression in a life that ends prematurely, but what do we really know? *This* is how long we live, after all; so *this* is how long we're supposed to live. It still may not feel fair, but it could be that the too-short life you're mourning has already contributed much more than you'll ever know just by having been lived. We are incapable of knowing how far our lives have reached, and are always reaching, out into the world. Really.

If you find yourself facing the unfairness of death, you have a choice. You can spend the remaining time believing that you're being cheated of something more that you deserve to get from life—that you're the victim of cruel fate. Or you can simply continue living through it as well and as meaningfully as you possibly can, deactivating your fears and regrets. Take a look at all the miracles that Life has already been, and always is. What if you knew it wasn't all over with *this*, after all?

When you take that approach, then nothing is ever over. You may very well discover that the thing you thought you were missing is really alive in any moment, and in every moment. Then you'll be given the clarity to recognize victimhood as a form of selfishness, and Life as the miraculous, never-ending magic that it is. A magic as "simple" as the sun rising and setting, and rising again. Don't worry that it may get very dark, because it always will; but then it really always is "the darkest just before the dawn." That's the moment when miracles usually happen, or we wouldn't call them miracles.

Does calling it selfish to feel like a victim seem unfairly critical and idealistic at a painful time? Well, maybe it is; but it's also the door to a very effective strategy for helping to remove a lot of the sadness and pain in any hurtful experience. Mostly the *psychological* pain, I mean. It goes something like this.

The times in life when we're the most selfish and self-centered are usually the most painful as well—particularly psychologically and spiritually painful, that is. The less self-

centered we become, the less pain we experience—and the less we inflict.

Have you ever noticed how some people go through really terrible things without a lot of drama and still care enough to ask how *you're* doing, while the ones who complain and expect sympathy the most appear to care very little about anyone else and seem to revel in their pain and even to be intent upon generating more of it for others? When we complain, we become obstacles to the kind of positive human exchange that benefits everybody—especially ourselves.

If you do your best simply to be of positive use to others, to contribute with your attitudes and actions right now, whatever your situation is, it will literally help to no end. Being of service to others may not take all the hurt away, but it is an action, in fact *a strategy*, that helps more than anything else can in amazing ways.

Sometimes there just doesn't seem to be any reason why bad things have to happen to us; but it is inescapable, isn't it? Usually, it is for some good reason that's just hard for us to see at first, or maybe for some good reason we'll never be able to see. Then usually the bad stuff isn't nearly as bad as we expect it to be and, as clichéd as it may sound, most often ends up being something we learn from—if we're paying attention, that is. It becomes part of our invisible evolution. And, as an answer to that selfish sense of victimhood, it gives us the ability to turn the pain around and demonstrate to other people how well they may be able to get through the same mess simply by sharing our experience and advice with them.

Naturally, it's all in the way you energize a situation. If you want to make it bad, brother, you can make it bad. But if you just relax and pay attention while you're going through what seems to be a bad situation, you'll often discover that there's even something kind of fascinating about it. Something remarkable, maybe even beautiful, that you never noticed before because you always tried so hard to avoid it. Something transformative. Even if it is really, truly bad, having that flexible, open attitude will still make it easier to get through the discomfort and hard feelings to the other side, and then to go on more easily from there.

As simple as it sounds, being negative about any experience in life makes it more difficult; being as positive as possible makes it easier. But you knew that already. Positive people survive more, because they've *got more Life*. Positivity expands; negativity collapses. That's a basic lesson of Spiritual Fitness 101.

And take heart—because even in the worst of times, there's still that whole wonderful, mysterious dimension of “magic” going on behind the scenes that we simply can't know about, yet. Unimaginable, unseen, miraculous aspects of Life about which we haven't any clue. We've all experienced it—that magic—with a crazy, coincidental phone call out of nowhere, or an old friend appearing in an impossible place at an impossible moment. Or with that friend or relative whose diagnosis gives them six months to live, but then they experience an inexplicable reversal of the condition and live forty years longer than they're supposed to.

From just the little bit I've seen, coincidences and miracles like these are only the tip of that magical iceberg.

Even science has proven the existence of the paranormal so definitively that we absolutely know it exists—through study after endless study, many held to much higher standards than typical research demands due to the controversial nature of the subject. It just seems hard, in our mechanical role as human beings, to allow all that mystery—all that magic—into the “reality” of our lives.

Well, I feel as if I've gotten off to a pretty fast start, since I've got us asking *Why me?* already and delving into the paranormal. Before I get down to the nuts (and I do mean nuts) and bolts, maybe I should back up and get a little more of that magical Universe out of the way first. So let's go back to where I guess it all started—with a great big *bang*.

