

THE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM

*Those of us will remain who can smile
in the midst of death in full sunlight.
(Quedamos los que pueden sonreir
en medio de la muerte en plena luz.)*
Silvio Rodriguez

In her samples of near-death experiences, P. M. H. Atwater found that 37% of individuals interviewed had these episodes when their lives were not even remotely threatened.⁵ She coined the term *NDLE*, or *near-death-like experiences*, intuiting that they were of the same nature as NDEs, and that death is not a prerequisite for acquiring firsthand knowledge of the spirit. The following actually occurred in the midst of dramatic action:

Mark McDermott of New York City scaled a wall to rescue a man who was trying to commit suicide by hanging himself from a large tree. Police and rescue squads arrived after McDermott had safely lowered the man and had begun resuscitation. The whole event, risking his own life to save another, infused McDermott with such surges of energy that it was as if he had skyrocketed through a barrier of some kind and was flung into otherworldly realms of power and love and ecstatic bliss, the likes of which he had never known. Suddenly he was possessed of all knowledge, especially concerning himself and the man he had just rescued. He also experienced merging into a brilliant light and had a past-life review. It took him several weeks to make sense of the Earth plane again, as he began to grapple with the typical aftereffects experienced by the near-death survivor. Mark

McDermott “re-entered” the workaday world so transfigured and transformed by his experience that anyone who knew him did a double take; overnight he no longer looked or acted the same. He displayed unusual degrees of wisdom and charisma as well as uncanny psychic abilities (although somewhat psychic before, he became more so afterward). Apparently, latent talents surfaced full-blown, and his intelligence increased above and beyond his previous IQ rating. He also found himself filled with a strong sense of being connected to all creation and all

humankind. McDermott has since gone out of his way to initiate service-oriented projects.

This man did not simply alter his attitude afterward. He became a new man, completely and totally changed from the individual he once was.⁶

It is not necessary to have previous exposure to religion—although it may help—in order to be the recipient of an NDLE. In another example quoted by Atwater, a man from Montreal had a revelation in his own home. Upon walking across the living room and sitting in his chair, he found himself transported into a world of light. In it he recognized the figure of Jesus. He, too, came back to his daily life in such a transformed way that his friends hardly recognized him.

Atwater's stories have their place in a book that is essentially devoted to encounters with death. The aspect of death is not directly visible in these NDLEs; yet, isn't the total rebirth of an individual pointing to an experience similar to death? Could we possibly die to our old self, even in the middle of seemingly mundane events in our life?

In the book *I Am With You, Always*, G. Scott Sparrow, a Jungian analyst, has collected many anonymous stories of what he calls "Christ encounters."⁷ He himself had such an experience on more than one occasion, which motivated him to inquire about the phenomenon and collect case stories. The witnesses he interviewed normally have many reasons for remaining silent. First of all, there is a certain natural reticence and humility about sharing this most deeply personal experience. On the other hand there is the fear of being perceived as a mentally disturbed egomaniac or intentional deceiver. No material benefit derives from these experiences—only the added responsibilities associated with personal growth.

What is the distinctive character of these encounters? Many of them occur to individuals who are active seekers on a spiritual path. The great majority of subjects have no high status in any spiritual group or organization, and most of them wonder why they were chosen. Finally these encounters do not presuppose an active religious life.

Christ encounters almost invariably occur in states of heightened consciousness. Thus Christ will appear in lucid dreams in which the dreamer remains aware and can to some degree influence the outcome of the experience (e.g., by accepting or refusing a painful experience). They can also occur in visions in which the subject is aware of the presence of a higher being, but still recognizes the physical environment around him.

Finally, some of these experiences occur in heightened prayer or meditative states.

Christ appears in what seems a tangible sense experience: visual, tactile, auditory, olfactory, or kinesthetic. The sense perceptions received feel every bit as real as normal physical sense experiences—in fact, the subjects define them as “more real.” Finally, the experience remains engrained in the memory with the vividness of the first moment of its occurrence, a recurrent motif of our explorations. This encounter is likely to mark the life path of any of the recipients, although some may turn their back on it. The experiences often allow emotional healing and this, in turn, is the basis for cases of physical healing.

Confirmation of Sparrow’s work comes from northern Europe. Robert Powell mentions a book published in Stockholm in 1973, by Gunnar Hillerdal and Berndt Gustafsson, entitled *They Experienced Christ*.⁸ Most of the encounters portrayed are of a visual nature. But others experienced Christ as an unmistakable nearness, as a silent, comforting presence. Others still heard his words of consolation inwardly. Many experiences occurred at night or close to midnight, and most of them refer to the all-pervading Light and experience of all-encompassing love.

The encounter with Christ can be confined to the purely auditory level. In *Friend of My Heart*, Claire Blatchford describes how for years she had been receiving messages from Christ, which she wrote down.⁹ These are not so-called automatic writings. While hearing, she remains perfectly conscious of her environment and of the meaning of the words. The thoughts themselves are more than what she can conceive of with her day-to-day intellect, and they give her spiritual nourishment and inspiration.

The event of the encounter with Christ can occur at various stages of an individual’s life. In what has come to be known as NDE, the meeting is brought on prematurely by an untimely death. The recipient often goes through a long phase (five, seven, or more years) of integration, a phase of harmonizing an all-too-obvious lower self with the intimations received from a higher self. And that is only a beginning!

The same can be true, to a lesser degree, of the more conscious encounters with Christ. Some of these are what recipients call warnings, a call for a change in direction of one’s life. On the contrary, other experiences are a confirmation of the individual’s maturity. Through such encounters, individuals may receive answers to spiritual questions, or be brought back in time (although strictly speaking they are in a realm outside time—the etheric realm) to important moments of history. In some rare instances, new

revelation pours in, similar in effect to the revelations shared by Steiner and other modern initiates. What many of the recipients of these encounters convey is a feeling of reciprocity in the relationship with Christ.

Helen Greaves describes an experience resembling an NDLE in a book that precedes the ones in which she describes her after-death communications with Frances Banks. At a time when she started to connect with the religious life, Helen was undergoing trials of the spirit. One morning she entered the church of a small village and soon became aware of a hazy, nebulous glow that seemed to emanate from in front of the altar and spread to the roof of the chapel—a golden light radiating from its center and shimmering with many colored hues:

“Imperceptibly a Form grew in that Center, a Form and yet formless, a Shape and yet shapeless, a Person yet not of human personality, an Angel yet wingless, Beauty of no familiar symmetry, Beauty beyond imagining. . . . Into my mind came the words, ‘the Angel of Presence,’ and yet I saw no angel.” After falling on her knees she continues, “For one timeless second, Eternity had penetrated the Veil, and spirit, mind and body were at one with the Beauty of the Creator. All was timeless, past and present and future.”¹⁰

Let us move further in the understanding of the conscious near-death-like experience and turn to two instances accompanied by more documentation than others. This is the case of Rufus Moseley in 1910 and of Jacques Lusseyran’s in 1944, both of whom have left us autobiographies. These two examples also have in common the development of a new kind of perception, which could be called etheric perception.

Lusseyran (1924–1971), the author of *And There Was Light*, had been blinded at age seven in an accident in which his glasses went deep into the tissue of the right eye. Already at that time he went from an experience of complete inner darkness to a new experience of light. About this he wrote: “I found light and joy at the same moment, and I can say without hesitation that from that time on light and joy have never been separated in my experience. I have had them or lost them together.”⁽¹¹⁾

This threshold experience forestalled the development of new faculties of perception. Jacques became able to see the light inwardly in association with people and things. When outdoors he could point to trees

or plants that he could not see physically, and knew what they looked like, their form or branching habits. Consequently, he could also orient himself in space and walk without hitting obstacles. He could also see people but in a much more alive and mobile way than physical sight affords. In this kind of vision a person is always changing from minute to minute. He was also able to “read voices,” to detect whether a person was telling the truth or not. This is how he became very useful to the French underground resistance to Nazism. However—he recalls—all of these faculties came to an end with strong emotions. Fear turned him truly blind, but so did anger, impatience or jealousy. Likewise, this state of grace was sorely tested at the onset of puberty.

In his teenage years Jacques formed a youth underground resistance group to Nazi occupation of France. He was arrested in 1943 and sent to Buchenwald. Before the liberation he fell ill of what was probably a pleurisy, coupled to dysentery, and infection of both ears. While given for dead he started experiencing inwardly the stages of his illness, seeing his inner organs and seeing his body from above. After that the process reversed and he actually felt the influx of new life: “that was the unbelievable thing that had taken possession of me. I had never lived so fully before. Life had become a substance within me. It broke into my cage, pushed by a force stronger than I. It was certainly not made of flesh and blood, not even of ideas. It came to me like a shimmering wave, like the caress of light. I could see it beyond my eyes and my forehead and above my head. It touched me and filled me to overflowing.”¹² The author saw a link between this and the earlier experience, as if the second one were a repetition and enhancement of the first one. After the experience he fully recovered and went on to help his fellow prisoners until the liberation, eleven months later. The experience of Lusseyran presents striking aspects of physical healing, in some ways similar to what we will see about Bill Wilson, the founder of AA.

Moseley’s life had the very unique characteristic of the striving for complete independence from creed and dogma, although he was declaredly Christian. He shared his faith first with the Baptists, then with Christian Scientists, loosely with the Pentecostals, and finally, especially after his direct experience, he lived outside of any denomination.

His life was underscored by a complete dedication to his spiritual quest, although this did not proceed from an uninterrupted life in the faith following his family upbringing. The experience that was to mark his biography followed a seemingly minor accident. At one point in his life he

had to reconsider his relationship with money, particularly money people gave him for healings that he had helped to bring about in their lives. At a meeting where an otherwise perfectly legitimate collection was requested for a minister, he reacted in such a way as to effectively block the initiative. Reconsideration of the events in the same evening brought upon him a deep feeling of shame that he described as an experience of the “deepest death.” This inner experience gave way to a deep resolve to stop looking for the “best religion” and to “dedicate [his] life to moving among the needy, seeking to be loving and brotherly.”¹³

The very same night he awoke between 3:00 and 4:00 AM and found himself in what he described as “cosmic consciousness.” This is best described in his own words: “I was given the greatest clarification, understanding, happiness and bliss and put in an almost unbelievable light, revelation and glory.” During the experience Moseley could still hear the doorbell ring and had to consciously decide not to answer it in order to dwell in the revelations that he was receiving. In the days that followed, he understood that this was a revelation of the Christ to come, not just a revelation of the past. From all of the above, the experience of “feeling as if reborn” appears in a new light. Although Moseley did not undergo an experience of death, the “meeting with his double” that reached its apogee in the above-mentioned instance was for him equivalent to a death of the old self, and the meeting with Christ the rebirth of a new self. This new birth was not achieved immediately afterward, but still relatively soon. Before this rebirth, Moseley explains that he had to overcome a strong romantic illusion in which he saw the achievement of an otherworldly love, a “paradise where I would be loved after the manner of even the most perfect of human lovers.” And further: “I had glimpsed such wonders in the marriage relationship where both husband and wife with redeemed spirits, minds, souls and bodies were first of all married in Jesus.”¹⁴

Moseley developed a whole new understanding of nature and spirit in which we can detect the gifts of direct vision of the etheric. “Even the cattle and the chickens, to use a fine line of Browning, had learned the new law, so surpassing were they in form, movement, grace, and beauty” he wrote.¹⁵ More about this special perception appears below and in the condensed biography offered in Appendix 2.

The Modern Christ Experience

Rufus Moseley experienced Christ in 1910, at a time when very few people could comprehend it. The same is true of Steiner, whose Christ experience in 1899 could easily be missed within the pages of his autobiography, where it

is mentions that he “stood before the Mystery of Golgotha in a deep and solemn celebration of knowledge.”

From the year 1910, Steiner spoke about the progressive change of consciousness that this encounter would mean. Many references to this event and its consequences appear throughout his legacy of books and lectures. It is what has been called the *Second Coming*, a term that may generate more confusion than clarity given the zealous or fanatical overtones it generates. It is the expectation of the Second Coming, rolled into one with the end of the world, which caused the frenetic expectation of the Apocalypse in the year AD 1000 in medieval Europe, and subjugated many brilliant minds of the epoch. It is this same idea that turns all expectations toward outer catastrophes and Armageddon scenarios, and distracts us from turning our attention inward, where the real event occurs.

Steiner’s understanding of what is at stake with this new possibility for humankind is far more sobering than the doom and gloom scenarios that grip us into a paralyzing fear, only to bind us to the promise of a delivering divine superhero. In very prosaic terms he qualifies this event thus: “The event to which we refer is that human beings can acquire the new faculty of perception in the etheric realm, a certain number of human beings to begin with, followed gradually by others, because humanity will have 2,500 years in which to evolve these faculties increasingly.”¹⁶ And further defining the nature of this encounter: “A certain number of individuals will see the Christ and will themselves experience the event that took place at Damascus. This will depend, however, upon such human beings learning to observe the moment when Christ draws near to them. In only a few decades from now it will happen, particularly to those young in years—already preparation is being made for this—that some person here or there has certain experiences.”¹⁷ Finally, referring to what the faculties of perception in the etheric may be: “This faculty will consist in men being able to see in their environment something of the etheric world, which hitherto they have not normally been able to see. Man now sees only the human physical body, but then he will be able to see the etheric body at least as a shadowy picture and also to perceive the connection between deeper happenings in the etheric world. He will have pictures and premonitions of happenings in the spiritual world and find that in three or four days’ time such happenings take place in the physical plane. We will see certain things in etheric pictures and know that tomorrow or in a few days’ time this or that will happen.”¹⁸ We have already seen some of these instances reported in chapters 2 and 3. We will look at more of these experiences in the life of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in chapter 6.

Steiner offered us many inklings of what this experience may signify for humanity. Others have pursued this matter further. More than any other experience quoted so far, Jesaiah Ben-Aharon's description of the Christ event in the twentieth century stands as an example of the highest degree of conscious encounter.¹⁹ The Christ appears here not as Jesus or the historical figure of the gospels. He is a pure solar-earthly spirit. Within His sphere, Ben-Aharon tries to convey in words the experience of the Christ's presence in our times. Through this new presence humanity can become co-creator with Christ. "For the first time in human evolution [since around 1933] the human race began to be a creative factor in cosmic and planetary evolution on which the gods themselves are counting in their future plans."²⁰ Everything we have described so far through all of the various spiritual experiences appears archetypally contained in the imagination he describes. The encounter with Christ opens for the individual, as for all humanity, what appears to be an apocalyptic rift between the forces that help evolution and those who hinder it.

Speaking of the event as it was experienced by souls before birth, Ben-Aharon says: "For them, the sublime Revelation showed itself to be the greatest wholeness on the one hand, yet on the other a tormenting split of self, mankind and the world." In the individual awakens the apparently insoluble dilemma of the distance between the higher self in Christ and the lower self in the dimensions of space and time. This leads to what Ben-Aharon defines as the Great Demonstration, and the overcoming of the personal abyss. This split of self has already appeared in many ways in the examples that have been given throughout this analysis of spiritual experiences. It was defined clearly by Henri Nouwen in his diary entry on the abyss, and by the last examples of Helen Greaves, Jacques Lusseyran and Rufus Moseley. Another example will be given later from the life of Bill Wilson, who also had an experience that could either be qualified as an NDE or an NDLE. This event showed him the most profound dichotomy between his higher self in the Light and his lower self subjugated by alcohol. Wilson worked for the rest of his life at joining the two extremes.

The experience of the meeting with Christ opens, for all the recipients, a degree of knowledge that rests within the shrine of individual consciousness and does not require outer proof of religious dogma. It ushers in completely new values and perspectives. Henri Nouwen, the theologian already introduced in the previous chapters, struggled to achieve completely new goals after his brush with death. In assessing his new task he tentatively expressed himself thus: "Until now I have been thinking and speaking from time into eternity... But after my having 'touched the other side,' it seems

that a new witness is called for: a witness that speaks back into the world of ambiguities from the place of unconditional love.” And further: “I must remain on the other side while being sent back. I have to live eternity while exploring the human search in time.”²¹

Rufus Moseley pushed this perspective further and attained a wholly new perspective both of the divine and of the reality of the senses. He went a step further than Nouwen in articulating a new theology grounded in experience rather than theory, a theology that transcends the dominating dualistic thinking. Talking about the “fourth empire” or “human-divine realm” [the etheric] that is now accessible to human beings on Earth, he indicates: “It implies a resurrected man with a wholly new mode of thinking which our academic philosophy and theology do not provide. . . . To understand the fourth empire we need another dimension to our logic. . . . The old theology . . . has achieved little more than compromise, for no true reconciliation is possible in the old mode of thought. In other words it is impossible to conceive of a union of nature and the spirit in which one or the other does not sacrifice something in its essential character. . . . Ordinary logic . . . is hopelessly involved in the dialectic of ‘either . . . or’ and can never fully grasp ‘both’ In the world as we see it now nature is at war with itself—‘red in tooth and claw’—and spirit is at war with nature in the historical conflict between natural and spiritual man, between the lusts of the flesh and the demands of the spirit. The fourth empire does not require the destruction and disappearance of the natural realm; it requires its transformation and sanctification, so that nothing which is beautiful and worthwhile in nature is lost.”²²

The above words are echoed by Steiner’s own insights that he no doubt gained from his own experience in the year 1899, as we know from his biography. In relation to how the experience will be available to human beings, he adds: “...in the course of the next three thousand years, and without a special clairvoyant preparation, more and more people will be able to come to a direct experience of Jesus Christ. That has not been the case in the past.”²³ Keep in mind that this applies to the fully conscious experience of the meeting with Christ. However, it is true to a far lesser degree for all of those premature experiences that literature knows as NDEs.

What has been described as the meeting with the Light or the Christ is a defining experience of the reality of our higher self and of that “love that surpasses all understanding.” The ordinary ego, ensnared, defined, and imprisoned in the dimension of the double, both aspires to and dreads, as an ultimate annihilation, the step of recognition of our deeper essence in the

spirit. The higher self—Steiner challenges us—is more foreign to us in our daily lives than any other human being on Earth.

To the ego, all other human beings stand as competitors that it tries to overcome or dim. This unspoken Darwinian struggle for the survival of the fittest, illusion though it may be, colors much of ordinary life, and the full recognition of our double is, as a rule, feared and avoided. Competition and fear are the grounds upon which the ego ordinarily operates, until it decides consciously to let the higher self educate it. The dramatic recognition of our higher self, which we have described from many experiences in this chapter, is accompanied by the realization of the divine love that supports us. People who have reached this stage, especially if consciously, can burn the “residues” of their lower ego in the light and love that emanates from the spirit. Consider the intensity and also the speed with which this happened in the life of Rufus Moseley (see more about this in appendix 2). The attainment of this Christ consciousness is not a stationary end result either.

To summarize, we can say—although in a very schematic fashion—that the path of individuation spans the spectrum between fear and love. At one end the ego, wholly identified with the double, lives in a continuous state of fear. This fear is confronted in degrees on the path of encounter with our double, and fully overcome in the full experience of our higher self in the spirit. However, all of us can let ourselves be guided and inspired to take the path of personal growth and love even before we reach this goal as a personal experience.

The ego that needs to be overcome and transformed is the essential instrument that ties us to life on Earth, that gives us certainty and assurance while we are more or less cut off from the spirit. Therefore it is a stage that cannot be bypassed in order to reach a higher consciousness. The matter of how to educate ourselves in an experiential way on the path to the realization of our higher self is the object of the next chapter.

What did the wealth of spiritual experiences we have reviewed indicate? Humanity has freed itself from old taboos and approached every matter concerning the gates of death and birth from the standpoint of freedom that is necessary for its development. The only approach, other than an external morality code, that can limit the excesses of freedom comes from the evolution of a new consciousness.

What PBEs, NDEs, previous-life memories, and other threshold experiences are showing us is the working of destiny and karma. The factor of *context* is the link with the idea of karma. Those who have had positive experiences often puzzle over why they are “chosen.” The case of Dannion

Brinkley is a good example. Why, as he says himself, did this experience befall an individual who had painted such a poor picture in his present life? Could it be that grace from previous lives rewarded him for what he had not yet accomplished in the present? Isn't this the same grace that gives him the strength to atone for his shortcomings?

For those who manage to come to terms with these experiences, given an understanding of the spiritual background, the path of integration is likely to be much easier and shorter. The case of suicide has shown us clearly how the fate of the living is tied to the destiny of departed souls. Through knowledge of karma and reincarnation, resolution can be brought to the most painful human situations. Knowledge of how destiny works adds weight to what we know from statistics. Suicide survivors are much more likely candidates for suicide attempts than other members of society. Apart from obvious considerations of trauma, could it be that their souls are also enmeshed with the souls of the suicides?

When karma is more and more understood and perceived as a reality, it is clear that modifications of the cycles of life and death do have tremendous implications at a personal level, regardless of legal and political approaches. These consequences are something that we have to learn to discern in our life, when we move from an abstract perspective on a problem for the whole of society to the concrete perception of the particular situation affecting an individual. How does an abortion affect a family? Can it be done lightly in the name of comfort? Consider that an abortion might be necessary. What will be the effects we will carry in our souls from having to make that decision? How can we first acquire consciousness of these psychological aftereffects? And how can we resolve them?

We will see in the next chapter an example of "destiny work" that turns its attention to all these imponderables of traumatic decisions that affect the history of a family: abortion, traumatic death, banishment, and oblivion. It is the systemic psychotherapy of Bert Hellinger, working with "family constellations."

Present-day humanity is offered the possibility to complete the tableau of the expansion of the gates of death and birth in the twentieth century by including the teachings of karma and reincarnation. This understanding, based on a modern perspective, was reintroduced in stages during this century at important turning points. Steiner provided the fruits of his research on karma and reincarnation in 1903 with the books *Reincarnation and Karma* and *How Karma Works*.

The seeds planted in those years reached a culmination in 1923. In that year both Cayce and Steiner took a new step in the revelation of karma.

Cayce started giving his first life readings in Dayton, Ohio, and Steiner gave cycles of lectures where, for the first time, he took historical figures and traced their incarnations back in time. Unfortunately his life was cut short before he could deepen his revelations. It was in 1962 that Ian Stevenson began studying reincarnation in young children, and his first book was published in 1974. If we refer primarily to scientific understanding, except for these landmarks and a few others, knowledge of reincarnation and karma has not progressed apace with other areas of knowledge. It is still waiting to be developed further.

Knowledge of karma and reincarnation becomes all the more urgent in order to acquire a better understanding of spiritual experiences that modern human beings encounter on their path more and more frequently. This knowledge will have to struggle against the concurrent deepening materialistic perspective that we witness in our world. Many who have undergone spiritual experiences struggle to place them in the perspective of their lives, as we have seen from the groundbreaking perspective of P. M. H. Atwater.

Understanding of the spiritual world needs to be accompanied by a clear recognition of the eternal core of our being that survives from one incarnation to another. The central spiritual experience that is becoming progressively available to all human beings over the next millennia is a growing reality that permeates human life and the planet's future.