



Vital Signs

The International Association for Near-Death Studies, Inc.
Building Global Understanding of Near-Death Experiences

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Reflections from Three Decades with IANDS Nancy Evans Bush

Interviewed by Amy Stringer

VS: What was there in the field of near-death studies before IANDS?

NEB: There was no field of near-death studies before 1975, when Raymond Moody gave NDEs a name. Even then, there was no actual field, only Moody and a bare handful of individuals doing their best to deal with thousands of people asking questions. I'd say the field itself began with IANDS in 1978.

VS: How did IANDS evolve?

NEB: By 1978, there was such an explosion of questions about NDEs that it seemed like a good idea to get researchers and experiencers together with other interested people to share information. Moody invited all the researchers he knew to a weekend at his farm in Virginia—I think there were maybe a dozen people altogether, including physicians Bruce Greyson and Michael Sabom, psychologist Kenneth Ring, and social workers John Audette and Sarah Kreutziger—and out of that weekend came the Association for the

"I have no quarrel with (IANDS) remaining small and doing its work. Although being bigger and doing more of the work would be a good thing, too."

— Nancy E. Bush, outgoing IANDS vice president



Scientific Study of Near-Death Phenomena. In 1981 the organization moved to the University of Connecticut and was renamed the International Association for Near-Death Studies, IANDS.

The essential purpose of IANDS has been to provide companionship for the members and reliable information—research-grounded information wherever possible—to establish the credibility of near-death experience as a subject and build the professional integrity of IANDS as an organization. IANDS has carefully avoided taking any stand that would limit interpretation of NDEs to a single model, whether scientific or philosophical, religious or secular. This openness can be problematic, but

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Vital Signs

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Thanks for a wonderful IANDS conference...

Wow, what a wonderful conference. First, I want to thank Ann Ellis, conference chair, and her committee: Yolaine Stout, Sharon Lund, and Bev Brodsky. Ann spent hundreds of hours working on coordination. I would also like to thank all the other volunteers for an exceptional event. The conference would not have gone as smoothly without the work of the volunteer committee and volunteers.

Special thanks go to Yolaine Stout for coordinating one of the largest and most motivated group of volunteers that we've ever had. We had more than 40 people helping. The same is true for all the registration activities. Sharon Lund, Rhonda Bailey, and Robert May's guidance and decision skills clearly made a difference. I want to also highlight the conference's AV and Web work provided by Chuck Swedrock and Bill Taylor. Their hard work provided us with excellent audio and visual services and great Web design.

I also want to thank our office members. Rhonda Bailey and Marybeth Maranuk went out of their way, on top of their usual work, to assist Ann and the conference committee with individual requests. I can't forget to thank the current and past board members, Debbie James, Scott Taylor and Linda Jaquin, who stepped up and brought culture, hard work, motivation, and wit to the conference.

On a separate note, I wish to thank all the healers who graciously gave of their time and gifts to make the healing day a grand success. I believe this was one of the best IANDS conferences I have ever attended. The affordable rooms and great location, combined with an excellent program and dynamic healing arts day prior to the conference, were awesome. I know it was a great deal of work. Thank you.

I also want to welcome all the new members and experiencers. I met many new experiencers, several offering their talents to committee work for IANDS. It was a wonderful week. I am grateful to all of you who helped, and to those who attended to make this a conference to be remembered.

Now, a little news about the state of the organization. The headquarters has been in its new location for a little over a year, and I am happy to say we are once again moving in the right direction. The stock market and economy have affected our membership. Among others, we are hearing from people on fixed incomes who are trying to keep their membership during economic hardships. We have put some policies in place to help some of those members from having to cancel this year. We have also asked all of you who could help to do so, and some of you have graciously responded.

Our library is coming along. We welcome any NDE books you are ready to let go of, and ask all of you new authors to send a copy of your books to the office to be part of our Dorothy Johnson library. We now have



Dianne
Corcoran

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it's also a great strength.

VS: When did you make your entrance?

NEB: A few months after IANDES was incorporated in 1981, the board began looking for an office manager. For some reason, I answered a tiny ad in the *Hartford Courant*. I had never heard of a near-death experience, hadn't read the book, knew nothing about psychic

[I had] no context for it. The Christianity I grew up with was a pretty amiable theology--Congregational UCC, God is love, and Jesus loves the little children. My father and grandfather were ministers from a very liberal, intellectual tradition. Oh, some people talked about hell, but we knew that God loves his people, and if you try to do the right thing, you'll be all right.

When I woke up my first conscious thought was,

How does a Chinese symbol get into the transformative experience of a New England Congregationalist who has had no contact with Taoism, New Age, paranormal activity?

anything. But I had management experience.

VS: Please tell us about your own NDE which you had during childbirth.

NEB: It was not a radiant experience; it was an utterly terrifying experience of the void. I had never heard of anything like it. I didn't know anybody else in the world had ever had such an experience. That left me with a sense that I was walking around with secret knowledge too terrible to tell anybody.

There was a group of circles. They were clicking, black to white, white to black. They weren't...I didn't think they were evil, but they were malicious, maybe the way a sibling would be malicious when you're being really heartless to each other. There was no question: they were authoritative. They knew stuff I did not know. I was the stranger there; they weren't. It never occurred to me that this was hell, and it never occurred to me that I was dead, only that this was what it would probably be like when I was dead. I just knew that this was a place other than where I thought I had been.

I was told I did not exist. I had never existed. It had been a joke. My life was a joke; my baby's life was a joke. I had a 17-month-old daughter; she did not exist. My mother did not exist. Hills, trees, robins, Earth did not exist. It was so utterly clear I was being told something true. It's hard to explain ...what would have been the point of arguing? What they were saying was incontrovertibly true.

"Calvin was right...predestination." There are sheep, and there are goats, and I must be a goat; some people are just automatically on the outs with God. And, the reason that occurred to me was because it was so contrary to anything I thought I deserved.

Most of the people who have written about unpleasant experiences talk about them as happening to people who were sin-ridden, guilt-ridden, hostile, God-denying, love denying, suicidal – all of that. None of which applied to me. I was far from perfect, but for heaven's sake, I had been saved twice at Billy Graham crusades! I had been born again....and again! There was nothing in my background that could in any way help me explain this experience. I didn't even know where to look for an explanation.

Six years after the experience, I was about to have a cup of tea with a friend when she said, "Here's a book we just got today. Take a look." I think the book was *Jung's Man and His Symbols*, and I was flipping through it, and suddenly there on the left-hand side of a page was a large illustration of one of the figures from my experience. I got a feeling of just sheer horror, because my immediate thought was, "My God! Somebody else knows about this!" I was so horrified that I simply threw the book and ran. It was not until several years later I discovered the circle was the yin/yang symbol. And this led to the question, how does a Chinese symbol get into the transformative experience of a New England Congregationalist who has had no contact with Taoism,

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New Age, paranormal activity? The question would turn my life around.

VS: How did your NDE affect your relationship with IANDS and vice versa?

NEB: Within a few weeks at IANDS I began to realize that there was a name for that experience I had twenty years earlier and had been trying to bury ever since.

talking just because the topic was unwelcome. The need is so great, and I've been able to say so little. But every once in a while I've heard from someone that my work has helped. That's worth the struggle. And of course, because I didn't stop searching for answers to give to other people, eventually there came a kind of resolution, of understanding, of my own experience. Finally getting beyond the literal interpretation and arriving at a deeper

I keep hoping that some of my conviction is getting through, that we have to recognize that the universe is made up of darkness as well as light, so we'd better pay some attention to the implications of that.

That was uncomfortable, because I knew beyond question that not all NDEs are glorious, and not all experiencers lose their fear of death—and clearly, nobody was going to want to hear that.

But, there were occasional clues in the letters coming into the office, little hints or even outright statements that other people knew about experiences like mine—“Why don't you people tell the truth?” Somebody had to figure out what to say to these people. And, although I had no background to start with—well, I was there, and the letters kept coming in.

As for how it affected my relationship with IANDS, I think it's accurate to say that in some ways it has kept me pretty much an outsider, even on the inside. More than a few people would prefer that my type of experience not be considered an NDE and that this conversation would happen someplace else, if at all.

In the face of so much genuinely wonderful talk about radiant NDEs, it's been hard always to have to say, “Excuse me, but that's not true for everyone, it's not universal, that doesn't always apply.” Looking from the other point of view, I think it's been difficult for many people, because of the very fact that my experience was “negative.”

VS: One of your greatest contributions to the study of NDEs has been exposing and explaining the distressing NDE. Will you share some satisfactions and frustrations this endeavor has brought?

NEB: I suppose one satisfaction is that I didn't stop

comprehension makes all the difference. And, I keep hoping that some of my conviction is getting through, that we have to recognize that the universe is made up of darkness as well as light, so we'd better pay some attention to the implications of that.

So, there are certainly satisfactions.

One frustration is that getting this has been such a long process of stumbling along. I was a junior high English teacher when the NDE happened, not a psychologist, not a theologian, not a philosopher, had absolutely no background in psychic anything—nothing useful in that sense; so it's been like following breadcrumbs through a very dense forest, piecing a trail together one little chip at a time. I've been just wild, sometimes, wishing that more people from other disciplines, who might have had some insight, would speak up, would write an article for the Journal, would say something.

Within near-death studies, PMH Atwater has done some fine work, moving people to accept that these NDEs exist; she has a great understanding of the difficulties for experiencers. Physician Barbara Rommer's book *Blessing in Disguise* was useful for its experience accounts, though I found it disappointing as information. Otherwise, within near-death studies there has been a scattering of articles and mentions of distressing NDEs in descriptive studies. Christopher Bache added some helpful insights as a transpersonal psychologist, and Gracia Fay Ellwood as a scholar of religious studies, and one should add Michael Grosso

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as a Jungian; but otherwise, there is still a great general silence.

When I first felt I knew enough to say something to other people, it was with the article Bruce Greyson and I put together that was published in 1992 in the journal *Psychiatry*—30 years after my NDE!

Probably my biggest continuing frustration is the general conviction that if a person has a horrifying

ask, “And so...?”

The horizon is so very much wider than what we’re looking at. There’s entirely too much stopping at the literal level, at the sensational level, thinking that the experience itself is all there is, or that it’s enough. I wish people would wonder more about what these experiences point to—both the beautiful ones and the difficult ones—not just that everything is wonderful and

There’s entirely too much stopping at the literal level, at the sensational level, thinking that the experience itself is all there is, or that it’s enough. I wish people would wonder more about what these experiences point to.

NDE, they’ve done something to deserve it; there must be something about them.

No researcher, to my knowledge, has analyzed moral character or previous behaviors to explain radiant NDEs, but an astonishing number of people seem quite sure that a scary NDE is a manifestation of deep-seated guilt, hostility, fear, hatred of God, rigidity, lack of love, meanness, and on and on. No wonder it’s been hard for experiencers to come forward to share their difficult NDEs!

VS: As an experiencer, what question annoys you most? Why?

NEB: Probably the one I dislike the most is, “Do you believe these NDEs? Are they really true? Do you really believe near-death experiences?” It’s such an annoying little mosquito of a question because it indicates just such a lack of thought. They are experiences! You can’t ask people, “Is your experience true?” any more than you can ask someone with an abscessed tooth if their experience of pain is true. You’re having the experience; of course it’s true—as a genuine experience. Now, what does it mean? That is something different. Do I believe these experiences? Of course I believe them. Do I believe they are literally true? That’s a different question with a far more complex answer.

VS: What question do you wish more people would ask?

NEB: I wish more people would look at the NDE and

there’s “life after death.” What does it mean that there are both bliss and the abyss? Why all these continuing visual images across millennia? What are all of these amazing spiritual experiences trying to tell us about being, about ourselves, about the nature of the universe and the way it works? What are we supposed to do with the information? What will it take to make us change?

VS: Do experiencers, as Garrison Keillor says, have “the answer to life’s persistent questions”?

NEB: I think some do, but I suspect that, for the most part, those people go quietly in the world and make few speeches.

The idea that experiencers come back with answers is part of the myth of the NDE, the myth that it’s all wonderful. (And because we haven’t looked hard enough at a bigger picture, IANDS hasn’t done much to address this.) It seems to me that many experiencers have a glimpse of an answer, but don’t know how to interpret it or don’t know how to work at how to live it. Too many folks get stuck in self-congratulations for their feeling of being special, for having “evolved”, or they get sidetracked with psychic abilities, or having had a powerhouse personal experience. Some think they have Ultimate Truth, and can’t accept that there are also very different perspectives.

It’s bound to be more pleasurable to marvel at a glorious NDE than to dig into one’s own psychodynamics to clean house afterwards, or to explore the history and disciplines surrounding these

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experiences that the religious traditions and Buddhism have found helpful. Some good words are there—"love, learning, service"—but too often actions don't follow. Many people don't want the information, they want only the experience, or they don't see how knowing about something like this can be helpful. And, a good number of experiencers suffer deeply, and wonder why IANDS hasn't said more to help them understand what's going on. It's complex, this business of revelation and communication.

*It's complex, this business of revelation and communication....
The deepest enigma for human beings remains learning
to live what we say we believe. That's the hard part.*

In fact, the messages have been with us since well before Deuteronomy, and in the Gospel, and the Koran and the Sutras, and in all the religious and mystical traditions; and each time there's a breakthrough, the convinced have to struggle with their egos, and there'll be a group of people who know that "This news can change the world!" And of course, they're right, but the work of self-discovery and self-discipline is terribly difficult, so inevitably the great "shazam" doesn't happen and the world goes on un-rescued. The deepest enigma for human beings remains learning to live what we say we believe. That's the hard part.

VS: How have perceptions about NDEs changed, from your 28-year perspective in the field?

NEB: The most obvious shift is that the near-death experience is now so well known that it has become the stock visual image for dying. Thirty years ago, when someone in a movie or soap opera died, you'd see the hand drop, or the eyes close. Now the room fills with light, the camera pulls up, and there is the actor's body, and misty figures coming in, and everyone knows what's happening.

It's nice to know that we've helped make NDEs so much a part of the culture. On the other hand, this bland acceptance leads to a trivializing of the experience. The awe is missing, and the wonder. It's like, "Oh, yeah, ho hum, another NDE. Sweet." People (the media, certainly) tend to have accepted the superficial myth of the beautiful NDE, and stopped asking questions.

VS: What are your hopes for the future of IANDS?

NEB: It often seems a bit miraculous that this

organization has kept going. The tens of thousands of expected members haven't shown up, and the starry-eyed promises of big money didn't happen, and the edge of the cliff is always just around the corner; but IANDS goes on. All these years later, and membership isn't big, but it's steady; the *Journal* is still being published, the only scholarly journal in its field, and *Vital Signs* continues, and there are still some local groups that support what we're about, and people still want good information and look to us to find it.

I have no quarrel with remaining small and doing one's work. Although, being bigger and doing more of the work would be a good thing, too. I hope that the work will encompass more of the kind of inquiry I've just mentioned, more voices from more disciplines. I hope the research involves more than trying to prove that OBEs happen. And I hope IANDS doesn't lose its head in celebrating its heart.

So, like the folks from Star Trek, I hope IANDS will "Live long and prosper"—and look beyond the moment! ☯

Amy Stringer is a contributing editor to Vital Signs.

Anthology Published: *The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences* is a compilation of research presentations from IANDS' 2006 Houston conference at M.D. Anderson Medical Center. Its editors, all with long histories in IANDS leadership, are Jan Miner Holden, Ed.D.; Bruce Greyson,

M.D.; and Debbie James, RN/MSN. Our handbook, published by Praeger, celebrates the first 30 years of research findings about NDEs, many of them first published in the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*. Find the book online at Amazon.com and other booksellers.



THE NANCY E. BUSH AWARD FOR LITERARY EXCELLENCE

Nancy E. Bush, a tireless advocate for IANDS for the past 30-plus years, was recognized at the 2009 annual conference in San Diego, California, with a very special Lifetime Achievement Award. Nancy has devoted countless hours during these many years as a Board Member, Editor of *Vital Signs*, Web Committee Chairperson, Publications Committee Chairperson, Board President, and current Vice-President.

Nancy has such a gentle and effective manner of dealing with so many NDErs who have contacted her over the years. She was the very first person in the office and has been a constant supporter of experiencers. Her calm and patient demeanor has been a vital tool in helping thousands of NDErs re-gain and maintain their dignity throughout their own very personal journeys.

Nancy has served the organization in many capacities and can always be counted on to provide excellent writing assistance, countless hours of Web work, and she is the best historian of IANDS. She has devoted her life to safeguarding, promoting, and providing honor and integrity to experiencers and IANDS.

To honor Nancy's many years of devoted service, IANDS has established the Nancy E. Bush Literary Award. This award, which comes with a \$250 honorarium and certificate, will be presented annually to the IANDS conference attendee who is a member of IANDS and who most exemplifies Nancy's beliefs in writing excellence. Nancy will select a winner from the previous year's articles published in *Vital Signs*, or papers presented at the annual conference. The first award will be presented at the 2010 IANDS conference.

STAR TREK and the *Elephant* in the Universe



BY NANCY EVANS BUSH

This deeply thoughtful essay was first published in the Summer 1996 Vital Signs. We thought it was timely and agreed to reprint it here by request. A reprint of Part I appeared in the Summer 2009 Vital Signs.

* * *

DANCING IN THE DARK

With the debut of Science three centuries ago, Religion lost first place on the dance card of Western civilization. The newcomer was dazzling and accomplished, and had soon whisked half the world out of its agricultural worldview and into the Industrial Revolution and on toward a technological wonderland and spiritual confusions. Between then and now, Religion has still found partners, but Science snapped up the sexy ones (and, of course, the funding); so after a while R. was sitting glumly on the sidelines with her confidants, lamenting that no one knew how to waltz any more. “The Dance,” she said, “is dead.”

Late-nineteenth-century physicists said the same thing about their discipline, in the confident assumption that physics had learned almost all there was to learn about matter. Both pronouncements were premature.

Within a generation, quantum mechanics had produced the astounding discovery that an atom could be subdivided, and what was more, that when looked at from one perspective, electrons behaved like solid particles; viewed from another perspective, they seemed like electromagnetic waves. Particle and wave; matter and energy. With this came the unsettling certitude that matter—the good, solid, physical, dependably measurable stuff—was dizzily otherwise: not solid things so much as fields of fizzing, unpredictable energy and infinitesimal vibration entities at enormous distances from each other.

Consider the implications for yourself: Sub-atomic particles make up atoms; atoms make up molecules; molecules make up cells; cells make up organs; and organs make up . . . us . . . which leads to the incontrovertible conclusion that our very own bodies which seem so—physical, are constituted overwhelmingly of space, occasionally interspersed with bits of dynamic buzzy stuff. But if we’re not solid stuff—if we’re mostly space—what are we? Who are we? Where do I stop and you start? Where are our edges?

Philosopher and psychologist Jean Houston says, “We all have leaky margins.” (Think of your feelings of discomfort in a crowded elevator where everyone is ‘leaking’ on everyone else.) We are a whisk of buzzy atoms and sub-atomic particles, all in a whirl and dance. We are a soup of photons. British physicist David Bohm said, “Matter is frozen light.” Look at yourself, and at the people around you—frozen light. You are the salt of the earth. You are the city that is set on a hill. You are frozen light. You are particle and wave; matter and energy; one might say you are body and spirit.

And the Star Trek God laughs.

Unhappily, Religion tends to be still moping about the decline of the dogmatic waltz, and appears not to notice the dancing all around her. On the other hand, people who think Religion is dumb or delusional don’t bother to notice that the body-and-spirit notion was her idea in the first place. Everyone wants credit for a good idea.

MAPS AND TERRITORY

The universe is our elephant, and like the men of the old story, we try to describe that part of it we grasp. Although Universe can neither be taken in by a human mind nor described completely from any single

What I believe about near-death experiences is that they are fleeting excursions beyond all maps, into the Territory itself—momentary trips inside the skin of the elephant, experiential blips into the nature of the universe.

perspective, that has not kept us from trying: Bronze Age nomad, twelfth century monastic, 18th century mathematician, 20th century physicist, 21st century novelist, or file clerk—we all look out on the same universe, look to the limit of our senses, describe what we find, and interpret our description. Over time, these models have developed into theories, doctrines, belief systems: all the forms of religion, the varieties of philosophy, types of spiritual discipline, branches of science, each believing itself to be the truth about the elephant of the universe.

Is this view of mine the end of faith? If beliefs, if theologies, if doctrines merely describe models, what can we trust to be true?

My experience has been that this understanding provided the beginning of faith, the bedrock of unshakeable belief. What struck me some years back was the stunning realization that, as different and wide-ranging as people's belief models are, many display a remarkable underlying consistency—what those more learned than I have called the “perennial philosophy.” Considering a group of these models together, we can trace their common characteristics. These are the models described by Scripture, by the great spiritual technicians called mystics, by near-death experiencers, and by today's particle physicists. Each set of descriptions is an attempt to picture Reality . . . Creation . . . the Whole. Each is a map of the great cosmic territory.

One model is made up of themes shared by sacred writings. These traditions acknowledge a “something other” in creation, a sensed holy presence, a powerful shaping force; in English, it is often called God. The scriptures and hymns of religious tradition include abundant mention of radiant light: “Immortal, invisible, God only wise; in light inexpressible hid from our eyes. . . .” They speak of the importance of caring, of loving one's neighbor, even one's enemy. And whether in stories of Eden or of the Dreamtime of lost Ancient Ones, they tell of an unimaginably distant time of harmony and wholeness.

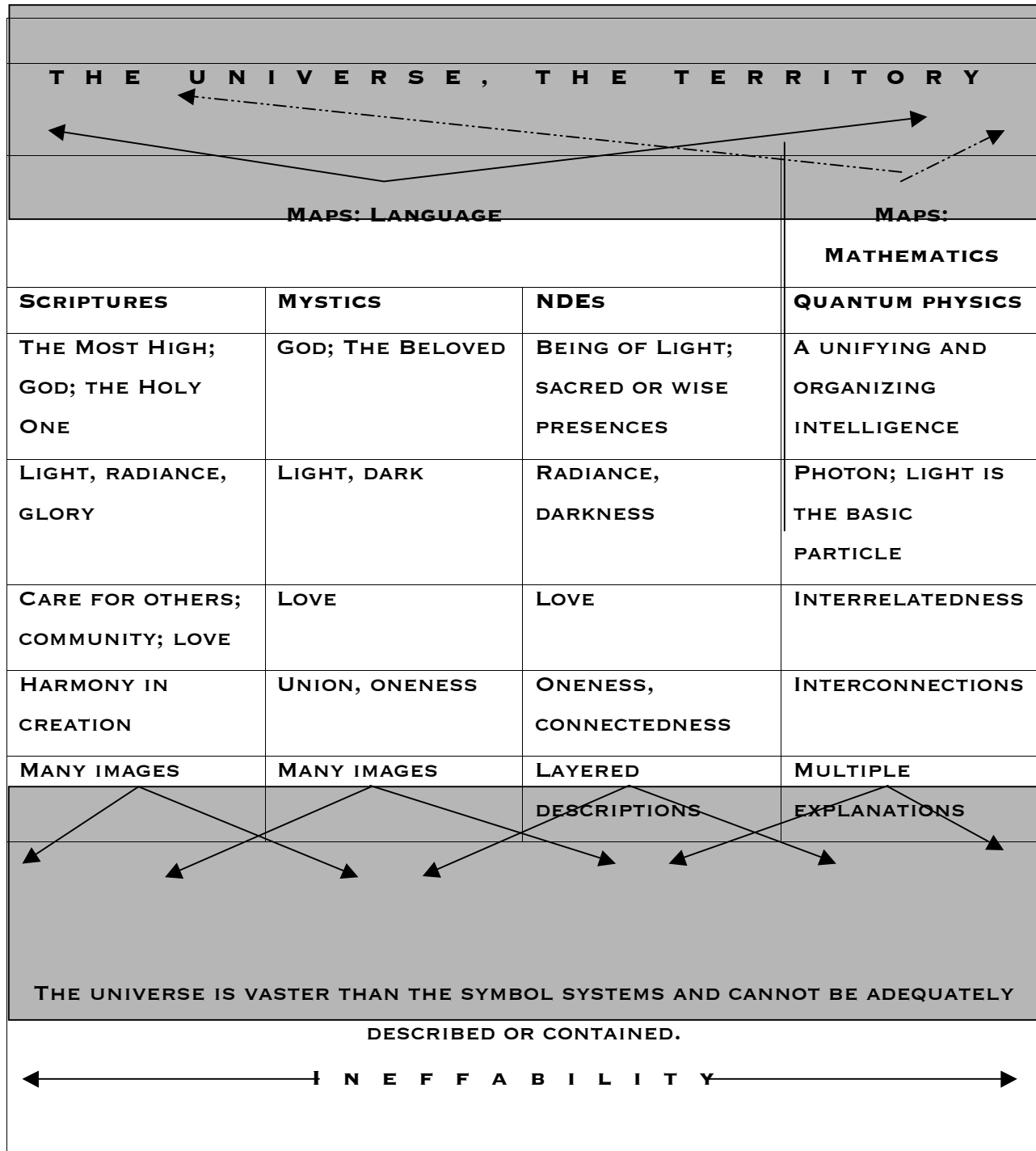
A second type of model is present in the writings of the world's great mystics, those persons past and present who live with a radical sense of in-breaking spiritual experience. Their lives have been captivated by a sacred Presence, by an unseen Beloved. Their experience is described in terms of light and darkness. They are overwhelmed by the centrality of agape, of unconditional love. And they attempt to describe their flashing moments of union with the sacred Presence as a seamless and ineffable whole.

The third model comes from the accounts of near-death experiences across the centuries. People who have had a near-death experience talk about light — its positive presence or absolute absence. They tell of presences, sometimes of a sacred Presence they may call by a name familiar to them from their religious tradition or refer to simply as a Being of Light. Their lives afterward are driven by the conviction that the most important thing is love, that everything is connected, that there is an oneness to everything in the universe.

From a fourth and quite different realm come the models of quantum physicists, their science described not so much in words as in mathematics. They have demonstrated that the most basic bit of existence is the photon, the smallest particle of light. Increasingly they say there seems to be, somehow, a shaping intelligence behind (or within) the workings of everything that is. They speak of their search for a unified field theory, following hints of a theoretical commonality linking all things. And particle physicists have documented the unarguable truth that at the sub-atomic level, there can be no objective observer and observed, for in a mysterious dance of oneness everything at the quantum level interconnects and interacts.

THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY

It would not be true to say that because these models share some commonalities, they are all saying the same things. To claim so would be no less naive and uninformed than to insist that all religions are alike



simply because they all deal with the spiritual. Physics is most emphatically not like religion, nor NDEs like disciplined mystical tradition. They are not all precisely the same . . . but because they are all describing the same observed universe, they point in a common direction. Taken singly, the models may have wildly differing interpretations; seen together, they describe a pattern in the universe: A mysterious and powerful motive

force, perhaps a shaping consciousness. Light. Unity. Interconnection. Relationship.

THE NATURE OF THINGS

Twenty years ago, the same sister with whom I had shared the linoleum rug in our bedroom was spending some time with my marriage family. We were in the kitchen one afternoon—Babs and I, her five children,

and my three. The kids were playing some thunderous game that involved smacking the surface of the big round oak table, when one of the littlest ones asked, "What makes the noise?"

This was a group never at a loss for theorizing, and they came to sudden attention. My nephew Paul, who was nine, could always be depended on. "Noise," he explained solemnly, "is the sound of molecules screaming. They're very small, and when something hits them they explode. So they scream."

Everyone considered this pronouncement, staring intently at the heavy table. Then: "This table is really old. How come," asked a six-year-old, "if the molecules have been exploding... how come the table is still here?"

Babs and I did not dare look at each other, but waited for Paul's response. It was bound to be good.

"Well," he said, "the table is still here because . . . because molecules are always pregnant, and when they explode the babies escape, so there are always new molecules."

My eleven-year-old was exasperated. "That is so stupid! How can molecules be pregnant?"

Paul looked at her with cool assurance. "Because," he said, "it is in their nature to be so."

What I believe about near-death experiences is that it is in their nature to bring messages similar to those of

contemporary physics, and the experiences that founded our religions, and the testimony of humanity's mystics. I believe they are fleeting excursions beyond all maps, into the Territory itself—momentary trips inside the skin of the elephant, experiential blips into the nature of the universe. Of course the experience is ineffable, because All-of-Creation cannot be encompassed by the mind of a single human individual, nor can it be squeezed into syntax and grammar and vocabulary. They announce that it is in the nature of the universe to be a dance of consciousness, of radiant light and terrifying darkness, of all things in relationship, and of a mysterious and ultimate unity. And because we are children of that universe, it is in our nature to be so as well.

I believe that NDE accounts, like our theologies, offer glimpses of the nature of the universe, of the nature of God, the Source (choose your terminology) and that radiant or terrifying, they illuminate our understanding of where we are and what is required if we are to live well in this place: *The Sacred is in your midst. Pay attention. Love what is holy. Care for each other and for the world. Be just and merciful. Amen. Amen.* ☯

Star Trek and the Elephant in the Universe © 1995 by Nancy Evans Bush. A longtime IANDS board member, Bush is a frequent contributor to Vital Signs.

Calls for Participation: Help Researchers, Author

You have the chance to participate in a study to help near-death researchers understand more about the childhood near-death experience and psychotherapy. The researcher not only wants to learn what people who have had a NDE as a child experienced, but also what they would like to achieve from attending therapy. Participants must be 18 years or older, younger than 18 when the NDE occurred, and have read and agreed to the Consent to Participate release form. This survey will take approximately 30-40 minutes to complete. You are invited to participate whether or not you have experience with psychotherapy. The results of the surveys are one way for researchers to learn what NDErs want from therapy, so that treatment programs may be designed specifically for childhood NDErs.

If you know any childhood NDErs who would like to participate in the survey, please e-mail them the link.

Contact Jenny Moores, MA, doctoral candidate, researcher, California School of Professional Psychology, Member of IANDS, jmoores@alliant.edu, (559) 801-2381.

AUTHOR SEEKS YOUR EXPERIENCES

Author Josie Varga is writing a book entitled *Visits To Heaven*, intended to be a compilation of near death experiences from around the world. This book is the sequel to *Visits From Heaven* (ARE Press) to be released January 1, 2010. The latter is a collection of evidential afterlife communication accounts. Both books will include chapters from well-known experts including Dr. Melvin Morse and others.

If you have had an NDE and would like to be considered for inclusion in *Visits To Heaven*, e-mail the author at josievarga@comcast.net or visit www.josievarga.com.

NORTH AMERICAN GROUPS: NEWSBOARD

❖ California group remembers Reuben Beckham

The Los Angeles (LA) and Orange County IANDS support groups lament the loss of former LA IANDS president, Reuben Beckham.

Reuben was born Aug. 22, 1939 in Cananea, Sonora, in northern Mexico. He first learned about spirituality and survival in the wild from Carlitos, a Native American who served as a guide when that area was still being explored. Altogether, he had three Near Death Experiences (NDEs)- the latest of which was most profound.

While living the high life as an international banker in 1993, he “died” from a massive heart attack. Starting out as a frightening NDE, it evolved into joy and transcendence where he “became one with God.” Knowing that he could no longer be a banker, he relinquished a six-figure income and became a hospice volunteer with Cassandra Christensen’s Project Nightlight, often sitting with dying AIDS patients through long nights. He was, subsequently, one of the founders of Compassion in Action, Dannon Brinkley’s national hospice organization for dying veterans.

Earning a Thanatology Certificate from World University



in Ojai, California in 1998, he became first a volunteer and then a spiritual counselor for Roze Room Hospice in LA, founded by Lena Beker with Reuben’s help. Altogether, he helped hundreds of people who died in hospice.

First attending WLA IANDS in about 1994, he was able to process his third NDE through the help of Darlene Jaman and our group. When Cheryl Birch, Reuben, and I formed LA IANDS in 2003, Reuben became our president. In 2006, he resigned that role and moved to El Paso, Texas where he was a hospice spiritual counselor, and founded El Paso Friends, the only Spanish-speaking IANDS support group in the United States.

Reuben died on September 18, 2009 in El Paso of double pneumonia and kidney failure.

With his repeated emphasis that, “We are the Breath – and not our bodies,” he helped many people die peacefully and inspired many others – regardless of whether or not they had an NDE – to live up to their potential. He touched many lives. I owe my own hospice volunteer work and Thanatology Certificate to Reuben’s persuasion.

He leaves his wife, Gloria, his son Andrew, and his stepdaughter, Ruth. All of us who love Reuben congratulate him on a life well lived and his graduation into the Light.

— Denis Purcell

❖ Columbus, Ohio, group celebrates 25th anniversary

In January 2009, the Columbus, Ohio Friends of IANDS group became the second longest continuously surviving IANDS group in the world, second to Seattle.

Founded by coordinator Nancy Clark, CT a near-death and near-death-like experimenter, in 1984, the group celebrated its success by inviting Rev. Howard Storm to speak at the January event. Ms. Clark also shared her experiences and gave a brief talk about the 30 years of scientific research into the NDE phenomenon as well as educating the public about near-death-like experiences.

Nancy traces the group’s creation back to when she had her own experience in 1979, when she had no knowledge or support for the transcendent experience. One evening she attended a church service with a book review on *Life After Life* by Raymond Moody, M.D. She hadn’t heard of Dr. Moody or his book but felt an inner voice encouraging

her to attend that meeting. There she learned that her experience was identical to what Moody’s book described. More importantly, the group encouraged her to share her experience and listened without judging her.

Overwhelmed by the support she received, Nancy drove home in tears of gratitude. She promised God that she would “give back” experiences by giving others information and the same non-judgmental support that she had just received.

Ken Ring suggested a few years later that Nancy form the Columbus, OH, group. Her promise to God inspires her to continue the work she started in 1984, and her belief that the Light is the One overseeing the success of the group. “I love this group so much, and I hope I am alive to see us mark another 25-year milestone,” she says. The group meets monthly. Read more at www.freewebs.com/iandscolumbus.

NORTH AMERICAN GROUPS: NEWSBOARD

❖ Group Forms in Winston-Salem, NC

A newly formed IANDS group held a one-day conference, "Transformed into Life: Death's Gifts," on October 9, 2009. More than 150 professionals and community members heard Bruce Geyson, MD, Diane Corcoran, PhD and an Experiencer panel moderated by Julie Lapham, PhD. The conference concluded with Rev. Susan Kennedy, PhD.

CEU credits were provided by Northwest AHEC and issued through Wake Forest Baptist Hospital. Books were available for sale, and IANDS membership brochures disappeared like hot cakes. Lunch and materials were provided for a \$25 registration fee with the intention of creating interest in a monthly IANDS meeting at Arbor Acres in Winston-Salem.

Contact Julie Lapham, 336.379.1000, JLapham@juno.com if you are interested.



❖ Pen Pal Request

Bruce Greyson has kindly been corresponding with a prison inmate in New Mexico (for a drug offense). This person is an NDEr, and would like to correspond with other NDErs. He does not have computer access; so all letters would need to be handwritten.

Any interested persons, please contact Julie Lapham at jlapham@juno.com. Thanks!

❖ IANDS Board Wants You

The International Association for Near-Death Studies continues to seek a diverse and representative membership for its working board. Staffed entirely by volunteers, the board invites those with the following skills: public relations, marketing, publications, writing, nonprofit law, nonprofit accounting, and Web/programming skills to submit their resume together with a letter of intent (about three paragraphs) to the office.

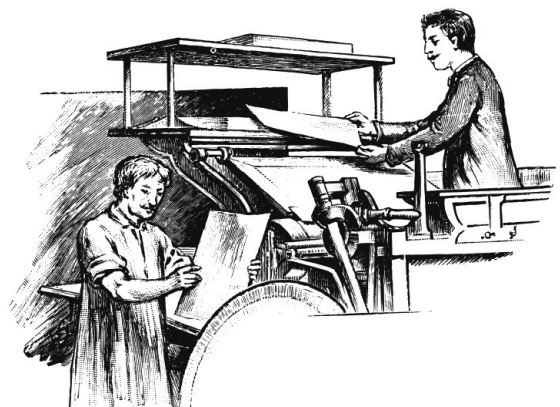
Some nonprofit board experience and familiarity with Robert's Rules of Order would be helpful, but not required. Time requirements range between one to four hours each month.

Write to IANDS at 2741 Campus Walk Avenue, Building 500, Durham, NC, 27705 or e-mail: Services@iands.org.

❖ Welcome, Goodbye, Thank You, Apologies!

Welcome to Jenny Maness, who has stepped in to edit *Vital Signs* with little notice. Goodbye to Barb Campagnola, whose computer crashed over the Thanksgiving holiday, leaving *Vital Signs* layout-less. Thank you to Lisa Watts, who stepped in at the last minute to snatch the copy and recreate *Vital Signs* at lightning speed. And apologies for the unexpected changes we needed to make to expedite the printing and delivery process of this issue.

— Julie Lapham, Ph.D., chair, Publications Committee



INTERNATIONAL GROUPS: NEWSBOARD

Germans celebrate five years with three-day symposium

By Chairman Alois Serwaty

In June, the Netzwerk Nahtoderfahrung (N.NTE)/German Friends of IANDS celebrated its five years of existence. This jubilee was embedded into a conference with the topic "At God's love door — the spiritual and mystical dimension of near death experience." As in the past few years, the three days' symposium took place in the wonderful conference center in Freckenhorst near Münster.

Surrounded by ancient trees in a park with a pond, this place represented the perfect environs for inspiring discussions and spiritual reflections, an almost mystical place. During a short reception, the chairman of the Netzwerk Nahtoderfahrung, Alois Serwaty, recalled the beginnings already 10 years back and their starting-point in one of the most beautiful sceneries in Germany: in South Germany, at the Bodensee, at the margin of the Alps, at the three state-lines of Germany, Austria and Switzerland. There people with near death experiences met and discussed their personal experiences in search of explanation and interpretation of what has happened to them. These meetings and discussions were accompanied by the mathematician, natural scientist, NDE-researcher and book author Professor Dr. Günther Ewald.

Up to this time there had not been any organized forum in Germany for the discussions of the multiple personal, scientific and philosophical aspects of those experiences. Finally on 1 April 2004, these meetings resulted in the official foundation of the N.NTE/FOI as a nonprofit and registered organization in Mühlthal in the vicinity of Darmstadt. Since that time the N.NTE has experienced a pleasant development. Annual meetings, seminars, lectures, the edition of an NTE-report and proceedings are evidence of the high willingness of the board and the members. In doing so, the network intends to meet the scientific aspects as well as the endeavours of the NDE experiencers to integrate this event into their life.

The aim of the Netzwerk Nahtoderfahrung coincides unconditionally with that of IANDS. Of course, the chairman wished some "vitalizing injections" for the organization because its financial and personal resources are still very limited. He outlined the vision of the foundation of an "Academy for Near Death Experience and Comparable Phenomena" in Germany within five to ten years as well as a close European collaboration.

The conference started with a great highlight: the première of a film project on NDE. The N.NTE essentially supported



and helped structuring this project. Besides the transmission of a 60 minutes' version in public tv-programs, a brief version of the film is dedicated to the education of juveniles in the schools on the NDE-phenomena, e. g. in the lessons "religion" and "ethics".

The lectures, discussions and workshops of the conference treated multiple scientific and philosophical aspects. The conference started with a lecture from theologian and professor Dr. Anton Bucher, Salzburg, who presented the results of two diploma theses of psychology students of the University of Salzburg on the psycho-spiritual potential of transformation of those experiences. The neurophysician Dr. Wilfried Kuhn summarized in his lecture the current findings in the neurobiological laboratories on the physiology of spiritual and religious experiences and put the question why these experiences originate in the brain and which neuronal mechanisms and areas of the brain are involved.

The discovery of the "real self" in mystical experience of NDE was shown by the theologian and psychologist Dr. Joachim Nicolay. Dr. Nicolay is vice-chairman of the N.NTE.

On the last day of the conference, two lectures which were completely dedicated to experience were the high spot of the symposium. In his lecture "Matter, Music and Mysticism – A Narrative Literary Contribution," Dr. Günther Ewald put the basic thought of the super string theory into the voice of music and dilated the "cosmic music" to become mentally

INTERNATIONAL GROUPS: NEWSBOARD



Chairman Alois Serwaty and Professor Dr. Günter Ewald (opposite page) at the German N.NTE reception. (Above) reception attendees.

mystical sounds which surpass the universe.

The auditors listened breathlessly to the last lecture of the family and physio-therapist Sabine Mehne. In her lecture she drew from the source of her own mystical experience and tried to turn the comprehensions which were born of her insight into a transcendental reality into the Here and Now. Her prime considerations were the deep changes as to religious belief, spirituality and a new relation to death. They give full life new impetus. Sabine Mehne received

a standing ovation for her lecture. The workshops and a video installation of the Celler artist, therapist of arts and hospice carer Dorothee Stockmar with the topic "In a different light" completed the lectures very well. There she brings herself into contact with near death experience, dying and death by means of pictorial art.

The conference offered a perfect ambiance for the five years' jubilee of the N.NTE and has given reasons for further activities. ☺

❖ New IANDS Group Is Third to Form in Australia

IANDS is pleased to announce its third group has formed in Australia. In addition to groups in Perth and Melbourne, we now have one in Sydney's lower North Shore suburb of Crows Nest.

The leader of the group is Carol Koenig, who brings a variety of fascinating experiences to this role. Carol has been a corporate manager, trainer, and support team expert in three countries in the

IT industry.

Carol would like the IANDS family to know the following: "I am very excited to be involved in something about which I have direct experience and to give others the opportunity to share their experiences as well as offer support to those needing to know more about NDE, its impact, and other related topics."



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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN (CONT.)

Continued from page 2

a wonderful plaque and picture of Dorothy Johnson in the library. It was Michael Johnson's last donation, in Dorothy's name, that allowed us to start the library. We want to do many more things with the library. This year we were able to get several *Journal of Near Death Studies* articles posted on the Web, thanks to Michael Johnson and Nancy Bush. There will be more to come.

On a sad note, it is hard to believe the board will be saying goodbye to Nancy Bush this month. She is one of IANDS' initial office workers and has been on and off the board many times. She has held many offices in IANDS. I want to extend the appreciation of the members and board for all she has done over the years. It has truly been a lifetime of service. Although she leaves the board in November, we hope to continue to have her help on some committee work.

I want to thank all of our members. When each of you finds a new member and introduces them to

the IANDS family, it certainly helps the membership, and provides those individuals with information and support. This will be the first issue for the new chair of publications, Julie Lapham, and a new editor, Jennifer Maness. Congratulations to both of you, and we are all looking forward to seeing this issue.

There are many more things to be thankful for this fall. However, I am always limited in space. I wish each of you a wonderful holiday season. We will continue to work hard to bring more and better service to IANDS. Let's all continue to spread the word about IANDS and its work. ☺

— *Dianne Corcoran, IANDS president*

NOTE: Rumor has it that the 2011 IANDS Conference will be held in the Netherlands — save your pennies! — *Julie Lapham, Publications Chair*