

## “Then I Saw A Light”

Rev. Annie Holmes

This time of year always puts me into a well of longing. I become more pensive, find myself looking out of windows a lot, dreaming. This well of longing is deep and certainly a mystery. Many people speak about feeling depressed at this time of year. There's a certain melancholy with the abrupt changes from the sweet sensuousness of spring and stark reality of summer passing away into the Fall, and then winter being truly, fully upon us. Whether we like to think about it or not, these feelings stir deeply in our bones, in that well of longing, but, longing for what... answers, maybe or surety about things too mysterious for words. Whatever you call it, whatever stirs in your soul, this is a pensive time of year. We hang in the balance of the turning of the year, the turning of the wheel to darkness and the cave of dreaming.

As the air is colder, imagine we are sitting around the fire of the ancients and hearing the story of Persephone she as enters the cave of the underworld. In the old story, the story before the classical Greece stories, Persephone, the daughter Goddess of Demeter, goes willingly, knowingly into the dark cave, to the underworld where there is work for her to do.

Only later in history is the story changed, in that Persephone is captured and raped by Hades in the underworld, in order to demonstrate to women that the patriarchy was in charge and alive and well. No, no, in the old story, she enters the underworld willingly and takes a single pomegranate seed and touches each lost soul of the living - dead on their forehead and thereby sends them into the light of love and heaven. With but a touch of her sweet hand and the healing seed, they are ready to enter into the light of peace forever.

Only a Goddess could do this, and she knows that, so she enters willingly into the cave of the underworld and only after entering willingly, does she find the love she has waited for all her life, the loving king of the underworld, Hades.

Like Persephone we are all at first unwilling to travel to the underworld, whether it be to the other world of our shadow sides, as Carl Jung called it, the underworld of the soul, or the underworld of winter or the other underworld, the world of death. We cry out, to this vast unknown blackness of death, as all people have throughout time have cried out, “Not me, not now. I'm too young, too much on the verge of my life, too this or too that. Not now, not me. And certainly you can't have my loved ones!” But here we are, whether we are ready or not, at this time of year, when we must travel into darkness, the days are short, the nights are long, we have no choice. Winter is upon us and it is time to travel, to travel to that deep well of longing.

Psychologist and author, Clarissa Pinkola Estes reminds us that, “It is through the conjunction and pressure of dissimilar elements, inhabiting the same psychic space, that soulful energy, insight and knowing are made.” Dissimilar elements are certainly at work

at this time of year; light and dark, holidays and depression, families coming together and tension. And once again we are reminded of the ancient wisdom that tells us, all life travels from life through death to new life.

This is the time of year to think about changes; changes in our gardens, changes in our moods, and changes in the air. It is precisely because of the contemplative feeling of this time of year, that the incredible incidents of Near Death Experiences or NDE's came to my mind. As we are invited to stare into the well of longing, that this time of year calls forth, we remember as the leaves die, and the flowers wither, that indeed we also will die. What happens when people die? We are no closer to that answer than we were at any other time of history. But clearly there is a thirst for knowledge about what happens to us in this process of moving from this life to what...? Many believe that death is an obliteration of the physical body as well as one's consciousness. Many believe that Jesus is coming soon to unite the living soul with the decaying body. Many believe death is simply the jumping off point for another go around in another life. Many don't want to think about it at all. Many are obsessed with death.

As a Unitarian Universalists I am always on the look out for what is happening in the religious world. I want to be knowledgeable about what people are thinking and doing and acting upon. This quest for looking deeper into the ways people believe brought me to one authority in the field of near death experiences and that is Raymond Moody, Jr., a psychiatrist who has documented stories like these for the last 30 years.

I believe there are two things we need to remember as we listen to near death experiences. 1.) we see what we want to see or expect we will see, or as William James in his 1906 book, Varieties of Religious Experiences said, "Those who see visions, seek to see visions." And, 2.) our own ideas and experiences of death and what we believe happens after death, will predispose us to whether we believe the validity of another's experience.

Moody tells us there are many people from all walks of life who have been to the brink of death and reported miraculous glimpses of a world beyond, a world that glows with love and understanding that can be reached only by an exciting trip through a tunnel or passageway. In one of his books, The Light Beyond, many have reported that the world they visited is attended by deceased relatives bathed in a glorious light and ruled by a Supreme Being who guides the new arrival through a review of their life before sending them back to live longer on earth. Upon return, the person who died is of course never the same. They talk of embracing life to its fullest and express the belief that love and wisdom are the most important parts of a person's life because they are the only things you can take with you after you die.

There are many critics of near death experiences of course and they claim...

1. these people were mentally ill
2. these experiences are only the mind's defense mechanism against the fear of dying
3. these experiences only happen to extremely religious people
4. these experiences are a form of demon possession, and lastly, too few people have NDE's for them to be significant.

Moody encourages the critics, stating that

they have helped him study the phenomena much harder.

Did you know...one in 8 people resuscitated had a similar brush with mortality and had at least one of the traits of an NDE. And a Gallop poll from 2004 said 8 million adults in the US have had an NDE, which equals one person in 20!

There seem to be 10 similar traits of an NDE experience...

1. a sense of being dead, fear accompanies this stage.
2. an out of body experience, the person at first does not recognize that the body on the table below them is their body. And when they wake up they can often relate experiences that happened to them when they were unconscious, or talk in detail of medical terms they know nothing of. They report feeling weightless and a sense of seeing their bodies as three dimensional for the first time.
3. The person speaks of the out of body experience as feeling no pain as they had had in their bodies, in this state they feel only happiness
4. Now comes the famous tunnel experience
5. In the tunnel people then almost always see a light. With the light are beings who greet them. There is an immediate increased sense of self-identity, they claim of feeling totally and completely themselves, then feelings of freedom and bliss and finally an understanding of what is taking place and what is happening to them.
6. While bathed in the light, they are greeted by friends of relatives or beings they have never met.
7. The person is often given a review of their life, they are often given a glimpse of the future, or some incredible wisdom or knowledge that they carry with them for the rest of their lives that they are often impelled to share
8. Then they talk of rising rapidly into the heavens. Here some are asked if they wish to stay or to return to their bodies, or they are told they must go back because it is not their time.
9. Even if they decide to return to their bodies there is a reluctance to leave the light and the incredible feeling of love.
10. These experiences are extremely hard for the person to keep to themselves. Part of the experience seems to be the desire to share it with others.

Of the literally millions of stories gathered by Moody and others, only .3% were hellish in their experience. Overwhelmingly the people interviewed were changed by the experience, which was positive. The one common element in the NDEs, is that all the people said they were transformed, changed. They described themselves as better people because of their experience. One woman called her experience, "luminous serenity."

How have these people changed? Well, there seems to be 8 personal changes that happen to a person who has a NDE...

1. They are no longer afraid to die. In fact most look forward to returning to the bliss, the love and the acceptance they felt.
2. There is a sense of the importance of love and leading a life of love.
3. They feel they have a new sense of connection with all things living and nonliving.
4. A new appreciation for learning and knowledge comes over them.
5. A new feeling of control, they are simply not afraid anymore of living their lives as

they have always imagined they could be lived.

6. There is a sense of urgency to live their lives to the fullest.

7. A better developed spiritual side, denominational religion meant less to them and spirituality meant much more. For many of the millions who were quoted to have told their stories, there were equal numbers of unchurched as were believers in a religious system.

8. And lastly, reentering the “real world” was terribly difficult as they all mentioned missing the beauty and love of the other world. NDEers look at their bodies differently. Instead of seeing this body as a thing to drag around for life, they now see their bodies as the temple of the spirit they saw in the light. They are less frightened of the world around them and of others opinions about their appearance.

Our society in general tends to deny the presence of death. Underneath our calm exterior many believe death to be evil, unnatural and to be avoided at all costs. When a loved one dies often that is the first time we are knocked square in the face with the fact of death and often there is worry; where did they go, the one I loved? What has happened to them?

Jack and George were members of my church in Wisconsin. They had been together for over 30 years. George and Jack were staunch Humanists who had found the UU church in their late adulthood and joined in at the church at every level. George died quickly one evening in the first months of my ministry. Jack and I planned his memorial service, after the service we spread his ashes over Lake Michigan, just as George had asked.

One afternoon, about a month later, Jack came into my office and sat in the chair, put his head in his hands and just sobbed. When he could finally compose himself, he looked at me with the saddest eyes and said, “All my life I have fought religion. I have been angry at God and rejected the one I had been given as a youth and young adult. I thought being a UU I wouldn’t have to deal with this again. But,” he could hardly continue, he said, “I want to believe in heaven and I want George to be in this heaven with the angels. Could he be with the angels and some love in heaven, Annie?” Some in my congregation said; “Listen Jack, you and George have been Humanists and you don’t believe in Heaven or Hell or God for that matter. So, buck up and stop your sniveling?” I began to see I had some ministry to do for those people.

Jack needed to know that he could change and move and grow from one faith system into another if that is what he needed or wanted. Jack helped me realize that we humans have spent our lives laying down boundaries. Death challenges our boundaries. The NDEs and their experiences challenge our boundaries about how we think the world should be and may even make us question values about life and death that we have always held true. I reminded Jack that there is an awful lot we don’t know about death and therefore about our lives and because life and death are so intertwined, Jack needed to know he could change how he felt about death before he could feel good about George’s death or even continue his own living.

Last Spring some of you heard me tell of a Vision Quest I hoped to take this past summer. Well, I certainly went on a Quest and I certainly had a vision. I didn't die and go through a tunnel or anything like that, but I had a series of experiences that have changed me most surely. I'm not sure I can ever fully explain the experience. With these kinds of encounters often you can only usually explain the outcome. The journey is often too personal and too big for mere words.

Simply put, I did travel to a new place of awareness for me, and comprehended for the first time in my life, that I have to make peace with the fact of my own death and the death of my loved ones, before I am ever going to be able to truly live. The vision felt like tormenting tensions, the dissimilar elements that Clarissa Pinkola Estes talks about. I had been blocked when it came to my own death or those I love dying. I had allowed myself to be blocked. I have felt since this summer that I am indeed looking into a deep well of longing. I am being cleansed and renewed, cleaned out so to speak, allowing me to find new ways of looking at death so that I can really live. I have to begin to make peace with death and the death of those I love. I'm not sure how else to say it. I never expected the Quest to be about death, and yet it wasn't really, it was ultimately about my life now.

I have felt a deep connection with the NDE stories I read, try reading some of them yourself, you may be amazed at what you find. Those stories felt similar to my quest for a vision. Questing for a vision or dying and coming back and trying to explain what happened is very difficult, if not completely impossible. And as I or others try to explain, to tell you, to let you know of these experiences, please be patient, these knowings are often deeper than words.

Most of us will probably never have a near death experience. But everyone can quest for truth and meaning in their life, and now, this time of year may be the best time to think about questing for your truth and meaning about death and your life. And find yourself opening yourself up to new truths, new ways of looking at life, your responses to questions, your behavior, your death.

What struck me the most in my quest, was the question that was given to me as a gift, "What would it be like to know that I would not be alive tomorrow?" I know I have what's left of my life to discover the answer to that question. This summer I felt like an NDEer. If anyone wishes to know more about a vision quest for yourself, or what I learned, come by my office and talk to me sometime.

One woman who had gone through a NDE experience shared that she hoped by sharing her story that she could give peace and comfort to those here on earth, and to assure them that their loved ones are happy and in peace and joy somewhere.

Carl Jung in 1944, summed up his feelings on life after death in this letter. This letter is especially significant since Jung himself had an NDE during a heart attack just a few months before he wrote this; "What happens after death is so unspeakably glorious that our imaginations and our feelings do not suffice to form even an approximate conception

of it. Sooner or later, the dead all become what we also are. But in this reality we know little or nothing about that mode of being. And what shall we still know of the earth after death? The dissolution of our time bound form in eternity brings no loss of meaning, only intensifies it.”

This Winter, make a vow or a promise to yourself to be open to new experiences. Take time to remember we also are a part of the life/death/life cycle. Thich Nhat Hanh prays, “Earth bring us into life and nourish us. Earth take us back again. Birth and death are present in every moment.” The seasons are changing again. Every morning the light is coming sooner, and in the evening it is leaving us a little bit later. Our lives are changing, stay awake, stay alert, you certainly don’t want to miss a thing.