

Historical Near-Death and Reincarnation-Intermission Experiences of the Tlingit Indians: Case Studies and Theoretical Reflections

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ABSTRACT: Six near-death experiences (NDEs) and three reincarnation-intermission experiences (IEs) recorded between the 1880s and the 1950s among the Tlingit Indians of the southeastern Alaskan panhandle are compared to NDEs and IEs reported from other Amerindian peoples and are shown to have many features in common with them. Tlingit and other Amerindian NDEs are also similar to NDEs from small-scale societies elsewhere in the world. NDEs and IEs share structural similarities and feature human and nonhuman spirits in similar roles. Perceptions of the material world are reported during all stages of both NDEs and IEs. These congruencies support the notion that consciousness separates from the body during NDEs. The implications of this conclusion for understanding the nature of discarnate states of consciousness are explored, and a model of survival that explains consistencies as well as individual and cultural variations in NDEs and IEs is proposed.

KEY WORDS: near-death experiences, reincarnation, intermission memories, life after death

Several authors have published or referred to near-death experiences (NDEs) among indigenous peoples. Jenny Wade (2003) examined 11 North American Indian NDEs. Timothy Green (2008) considered another. Gregory Shushan (2016) referred to several additional Amer-

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indian NDEs in relation to revitalization movements. Juan Gómez-Jeria (1993) reported an NDE from the Mapuche of Chile. Dorothy Ayers Counts (1983), Green (1984), Allan Kellehear (2001, 2008), and James McClenon (2006a) described NDEs from small-scale indigenous societies elsewhere in the world.

The 50 or so NDEs assembled by these authors constitute an important subset of non-Western NDEs, which differ from Western NDEs in the rarity of light and tunnel sensations and life reviews (Kellehear, 2008, 2009; Ohkado & Greyson, 2014). NDEs from small-scale indigenous societies, many of which have tribal social organizations and a hunter-gatherer subsistence base, may be contrasted with those from complex state-level societies such as India, Thailand, China, and Japan (Becker, 1981; Murphy, 2001; Ohkado & Greyson, 2014; Pasricha & Stevenson, 1986). The former reveal the impacts of an animistic worldview rather than Hinduism or Buddhism, although the more acculturated sometimes have overlays from world religions, especially Christianity—as, for example, when spirit entities are identified as Jesus rather than a native cultural figure.

In this paper, I present six NDEs recorded between the 1880s and the 1950s among the Tlingit Indians of the southeastern Alaskan panhandle. NDEs reported before Moody (1975) drew attention to the phenomenon are valuable because they are free from bias that might come from an awareness of the patterns he delineated. However, seldom are they directly comparable to contemporary cases. Only a few are based on interviews with the experiencers or are related by the experiencers themselves. Some derive from second-hand contemporary accounts, and others are culled from previously published sources that may be quite old.

The six NDEs included here were first reported by American anthropologists Franz Boas, Frances Knapp, John Swanton, and Frederica de Laguna, who were interested in them for the insights into cultural traditions they provided and who were not concerned with the question of their relation to experience. Several of the accounts are said to have occurred in earlier generations. These stories doubtless had been retold many times before being written down by the ethnographers and could have influenced each other. At least one has a variant. Nevertheless, the similarity of these accounts to NDE accounts from other small-scale societies is not a trivial matter, and they may well be grounded in events that occurred more or less as narrated. I will follow established practice and treat these historical accounts as NDEs, with the understanding that their exact relation to experience is uncertain.

In addition to the six NDEs, I introduce three Tlingit intermission experiences (IEs), that is, memories of the interval between death and rebirth in reincarnation cases. Memories of the intermission have been reported in about 20% of the reincarnation cases that researchers have studied (Matlock & Giesler-Petersen, 2016; Sharma & Tucker, 2004). None of these cases have come from small-scale indigenous societies, however. The Tlingit IEs described here are the first IEs from small-scale societies to be aired outside of the anthropological literature. All were reported originally by the same ethnographers and came from the same time period as the NDEs.

My juxtaposition of NDEs and IEs may be surprising, but there are good reasons to consider these narratives together. NDEs typically begin with an out-of-body experience (OBE) in which the experiencer sees one's body from the outside, then move on to a "transcendental" phase that includes scenes of what in Western countries is commonly regarded as Heaven, and conclude with return to the body. IEs likewise begin with the separation of consciousness from the body and perception of events surrounding death, followed by discarnate adventures of varying duration, and then the selection of parents for the next life and return to a body (Matlock & Giesler-Petersen, 2016; Sharma & Tucker, 2004). Not all NDEs include all three stages, nor do all IEs, yet these stages characterize the structure of the experiences cross-culturally. Both Western and non-Western NDEs and IEs feature contacts with the spirits of deceased relatives and nonhuman entities. In both, there may be perceptions of the material world. The similarities of structure and core content in NDEs and IEs hint at common processes at work in them.

The Tlingit: People and Culture

The Tlingit language is related to the Athapaskan languages that western Canadian first nations' peoples speak (Greenberg, 1987). This linguistic similarity identifies the Tlingit as members of a migratory wave into the Americas later than those that brought the native peoples from whom other Amerindian NDE accounts have been collected (see Greenberg, Turner, & Zegura, 1986).

Archeologists have found that the Tlingit have lived in their present locale around Sitka on the Alaskan panhandle since at least 500 BCE (de Laguna, 1972). Their first known contact with non-natives was with Russian trappers and traders in the 18th century. In the early 19th century, the Russian Orthodox priest Ioan (Ivan) Veniaminov lived with the Tlingit, learned their language, and produced the

first comprehensive study of their culture (Kaserman, 2007; Veniaminov, 1840). After the purchase of Alaska by the United States in 1867, the Tlingit were visited by several American ethnographers, including Boas, Knapp, and Swanton. In the 1950s, de Laguna conducted the most extensive fieldwork with an inland group.

The Tlingit are organized into two intermarrying groups, called moieties: the Raven and the Eagle or Wolf. Each moiety is subdivided into matrilineal sibs, or clans, that are themselves composed of lineages, or houses. A child is born into its mother's moiety and, upon maturity, marries a member of its father's moiety. Each moiety is associated with certain motifs, or crests, displayed on objects like totem poles. The Tlingit live in permanent villages, supporting themselves by hunting, fishing, and gathering nuts and berries. Their environment has allowed them to develop a rich culture that they share with other societies in the region known to anthropologists as the Northwest Coast.

Northwest Coast societies are ranked between aristocracy and commoners. Historically, some of the aristocracy kept captives from other tribes as slaves. Shamans had a prominent place as medicine men. Central to the culture were great feasts, called potlatches, at which the moieties alternated as hosts and guests. The most important potlatch was the mortuary potlatch, at which food was thrown into a fire to feed the spirit of the recently deceased (Kan, 1989). A crackling fire was thought to be the sound of the spirit asking to be fed. Traditionally the Tlingit cremated their dead, but by the 20th century, under the influence of Christian missionaries, they were instead burying them. The bodies of shamans were interred in a special graveyard. Shamans and the elite often had grave houses, provided for use of the spirit in the afterlife (de Laguna, 1972).

Like indigenous cultures the world over, the Tlingit subscribed to an animistic worldview that posits a spirit domain parallel to everyday physical reality with the possibility of interaction between the living and dead. E. B. Tylor (1877), who first identified this outlook and named it, showed it to be fundamentally experiential and empirical, a conclusion derived from phenomena such as apparitions, dreams in which deceased human figures appeared, mediumistic trances, shamanic journeying, and what today are called NDEs and OBEs. Members of many animistic cultures believe in reincarnation, on the basis of dream announcements, telltale behaviors and birthmarks, and claims by children to have lived before. Animism is sometimes said to denote a belief that all objects or phenomena of the natural

world are imbued with spirits or souls, but this feature of animism is not universal in indigenous societies (Matlock, 1993, 1995). Animism should not be confused with shamanism, which refers to an array of practices—widely varying cross-culturally—that rest upon the animistic system.

The Tlingit believed that upon death an individual's spirit travels to one of three levels of heaven or lands of the dead. The spirits of those who die by violence go to the uppermost heaven, called *Kiwa'a*, where they are visible to the living as the Northern Lights. *Kiwa'a* is presided over by an entity named *Tahi't*. The spirits of those who die nonviolent deaths go to a midlevel heaven, located across a river on the same plane as the terrestrial world. Witches and other social outcasts go to a lower-level (subterranean) Dog Heaven and are ineligible for reincarnation. Spirits who have gone to either of the upper levels of heaven may reincarnate at any time, ideally to a maternal relative, so that they are in position to inherit the hereditary name and be eligible to receive the tangible and intangible property of the deceased persons with whom they are identified. Identifications are made on the basis of signs that include birthmarks and other congenital scars, distinctive behaviors, and personality traits reminiscent of a deceased person. When they become old enough to speak, some children talk about people and incidents from their past lives (de Laguna, 1972; Matlock, 1990a; Stevenson, 1966, 1974).

Six Tlingit Near-Death Experiences

NDE Accounts

The following six NDE accounts were collected and published by Boas (1890), Knapp (Knapp & Childe, 1896), Swanton (1908), and de Laguna (1972). De Laguna (1972) and Knapp and Childe (1896) presented other accounts, but I found them to be either brief or repetitive and to add little to those included here. To enable maximum exposure of their details, rather than summarize these accounts, I quote them verbatim from the original sources. They are presented in chronological order by their publication date and are numbered to facilitate reference to them later.

(1). The first NDE account is one of the earliest recorded, by Boas (1890). It tells the story of a young shaman who apparently died and was buried, then unexpectedly returned to life.

A shaman had been sick for many years. When he felt he could not recover, and death was approaching, he asked his mother to take good

care of his dog. He died. The corpse was wrapped in furs, and on the fourth day he was buried in the graveyard of the shamans, near the beach. Every day his mother went to the little house where his body was deposited, bewailing his death, and burning food for him. One day the dog, who had accompanied her, began to bark, and would not be quieted. Suddenly she heard something moving in the grave, and a sound as if someone was awakening after a long sleep. She fled, terrified, and told the people what she had heard. They went to the grave, opened it, and found that the dead man had returned to life. They carried him home, and gave him some food. But he felt weak, and it was not until he had slept long and soundly that he began to speak. "Mother," he said, "why did you not give me to eat when I asked you? Did you not hear me? I said, 'I am hungry,' and nudged you. I wanted to touch your right side, but I was unable to do so. I was compelled by a magic force to stand at your left side. You did not reply, but merely touched your left side, saying, 'That is a bad omen.' When I saw you eating, I asked you to let me take part in your meal, but you did not answer, and without your permission I was not able to partake of any food. You said, 'The fire crackles,' and you threw some of your meal into it.

"When I was dead I did not feel any pain. I sat by my body, and saw how you prepared it for burial, and how you painted my face with our crest. I heard you, O mother, mourning at my grave. I told you that I was not dead, but you did not hear me. After four days I felt as though there was no day and no night. I saw you carrying away my body, and felt compelled to accompany it, although I wished to stay in our house. I asked every one of you to give me some food, but you threw it into the fire, and then I felt satisfied. At last I thought, 'I believe I am dead, for nobody hears me, and the burnt food satisfies me,' and I resolved to go into the land of the souls. Soon I arrived at a fork in the road. A much-trodden road led the way, while the other seemed to have been seldom used. I followed the former. I longed to die, and went on and on, hoping to reach the country of the deceased. At last I arrived at a steep rock, the end of the world. At the foot of the rock a river flowed sluggishly. On the other side I saw a village, and recognized many of its inhabitants. I saw my grandmother and my uncle who have long been dead, and many children whom I had once tried to cure. But many of those I saw I did not know. I cried, 'Oh, come, have pity upon me! Take me over to you!' But they continued to wander about as though they did not hear me. I was overcome by weariness, and lay down. The hard rock was my pillow. I slept soundly, and when I awoke I did not know how long I had slept. I stretched my limbs and yawned. Then the people in the village cried, 'Somebody is coming! Let us go and take him across the river!' A boat came to where I stood, and took me to the village. Everyone greeted me kindly. I was going to tell them of this life, but they raised their hands and motioned me to be silent, saying, 'Don't speak of these

matters; they do not belong to us.' They gave me salmon and berries to eat, but everything had a burnt taste, although it looked like good food; therefore I did not touch it. They gave me water, but as I was about to drink it I found that it looked green and had a bitter taste. They told me that the river which I had crossed was formed of the tears shed by the women over the dead; therefore you must not cry until your dead friend has crossed the river.

"I thought, 'I came here to die, but the spirits lead a miserable life. I will rather endure the pains my mother inflicts upon me than stay here.' The spirits asked me to stay, but I was not moved by their entreaties, and left. As soon as I turned round, the river had disappeared, and I found myself on a path that was seldom trodden by man. I went on and on, and saw many hands growing out of the ground, and moving towards me, as though they were making something. Far away I saw a great fire, and close behind it was a sword swinging around. When I followed the narrow path I saw many eyes, which were all fixed upon me. But I did not mind them, for I wanted to die, and I went on and on. The fire was still at a distance. At last I reached it, and then I thought, 'What shall I do? My mother does not hear me. I hate the life of the spirits. I will die a violent death, and go to Tahit [in Kiwa'a]. I put my head into the fire, right where the swords are swinging round. Then all of a sudden I felt cold. I heard my dog barking and my mother crying. I stretched my limbs, peeped through the walls of my little grave, and saw you, O my mother, running away. I called my dog; he came to see me, and then you arrived and found me alive. Many would like to return from the country of the spirits, but they dread the hands, the eyes, and the fire; therefore the path is almost obliterated.'" (Boas, 1890, pp. 843–844)

(2). Frances Knapp (Knapp & Childe, 1896) reported a second account, which was said to have occurred sometime in the indefinite past. She mentioned two other NDEs briefly (pp. 160–161) but said that in the main they had similar features to the following. Again, the experience is related to what appeared to be a natural death.

The soul of one Mutsak, it is claimed, left the body for two whole days, then returned to give the world this strange story:

"The path to the river led over a steep hill choked with briars and devil's club. Without thick shoes and stockings I could not have made my way at all. Beasts of the forest attacked me on every side, but my war paint and brave knife soon frightened them away. I reached the river and shouted with all my might. A boatman responded to my call, and in a few minutes appeared and conveyed me across the stream to spirit-land.

"In great haste I set out to find my uncle. To my surprise, he did not seem glad to see me; looked at me sorrowfully, and I almost thought reproachfully, and said:

“My nephew, what has brought you here? Are you hungry? Do not eat, I beg of you! Hurry back, as fast as ever you can, to the good home you have left!”

“I turned my back on him, somewhat indignant, and proceeded alone to make the rounds of the village. There were four rows of houses, I found, and those longest dead lived in the last tier. Before each row I dropped a blanket as I passed. Such misery I never dreamed of. Spirit-land is full of unhappy ones! Each house had its fire-place, but only those whose bodies had been burned could enjoy their warmth. Several souls sat in one corner of a great, square room, shivering with cold. ‘Why don’t you draw nearer the fire?’ I asked. ‘We can’t,’ they answered mournfully; ‘our bodies were never burned.’

“Other poor souls were starving. ‘Return home,’ they begged me, ‘return and tell our people how we suffer through their carelessness. They have given us no food for this entire year.’

“Others again had scarcely any clothing. ‘Our people are to blame,’ they complained, with great bitterness. ‘They have neglected to remember us with blankets.’

“My mother’s spirit came to me, and said, ‘You have a great mission. Go home and tell the Indians what your experience has taught you. Give them also this message for me: It is not enough to provide the spirits with food; they are thirsty, and a bottle or dish of water should be buried by the funeral pyre.

“‘Also say to them that when a dead body lies in a house where there is a child, unless they want another death in the family, they should split the end of a small stick, fill it with charcoal, and place it by the child’s bed with the split end pointing toward spirit-land. Or, better still, tell them to hang a row of halibut hooks along the side of the room. Spirits are afraid of halibut hooks.’

“So, one by one, they came to me bringing their messages. They were so anxious that I should leave, that they commenced beating me and clubbing me, until I was glad to run away.” (Knapp & Childe, 1896, pp. 157–160)

(3). The next NDE account explains the origin of the mortuary potlatch and other aspects of how the Tlingit treated their dead. Again, there is a nonviolent death and travel to the midlevel heaven.

In olden days a certain person died and thought it was so hard to walk up to the ghosts’ country that he came back. Then he said to the people, “I haven’t any moccasins. I haven’t any gloves on. That is a very hard place to go up through, for there are lots of devil clubs and other kinds of bushes along the way. You must also sing songs when anybody dies. It is the same as a road for him and will lead him. There are wolves and bears along the way, which one has to protect himself against.” So the people gave him moccasins and gloves and put a knife in his hand so that he could defend himself. He also said that there

were many houses there, and told them to dress him up, put red paint on his face, and eagle down on his hair. He had come to life only to explain how the dead should be treated, so after he had told them all those things he passed away again. Just before going he said, "When the fire crackles at a certain time—for that is the only way they can talk to you in this world—it is because the spirits are hungry. You must then put grease, berries, and other kinds of food into the fire." The first time he died, the spirits asked, "What did your people give you to eat when you started on your journey?" So, nowadays when anyone dies people always give feasts to feed the spirits. In the places which people reach after death there are many houses in rows, and the spirits assemble in those houses to share the food sent up from this world. All of the grave houses are named by the spirits, who give the same names to their houses in the ghost country. (Swanton, 1908, p. 461)

(4). The fourth NDE account also involves a nonviolent death and travel to the midlevel heaven.

When a Wolf man at Sitka was about to give a feast the fire began crackling and he said angrily, "Why don't you spirits work for food and blankets? You always want people to give them to you." As soon as this man was through feasting he fell sick and two days afterwards he said, "Numbers of spirits have come to welcome me." Then he died. So his friends began to dress him up in his war clothes and they put a war spear in his hands. After a time, however, he came to life again and told the people what he had seen. He said that he had seen lots of people outside on the porches of the grave houses. One of these, a chief who had died long ago, spoke from his porch, saying, "Do you think the spirits are getting starved that you talk to us that way? We are not getting starved. Do you think that you are going to destroy all the spirits with that war spear?" And on account of the war spear they sent him back into the world. The man also said that that is "an everlasting place" (i.e., a very large one), like a regular town, and added, "Whenever any man is going to give a feast for one who has died they feel very happy over it there." The man died and came back to life four times, after which the war spear was taken from him and he died for good. (Swanton, 1908, pp. 462–463)

(5). A fifth account, contributed by de Laguna (1972), concerns a boy named Laxkunik who was spanked by his mother for some infraction and sent to his room without supper. Later he was found apparently dead. His body was dressed in a blanket and prepared for cremation. The narrative relates his experiences before he returned to life the following morning, 12 hours later. Material in parenthesis is part of the original text, whereas that in brackets has been added for clarification.

He [the spirit of the boy] sits over there (the narrator pointed to a box against the back wall of the room).

Then he goes around, [the spirit of] that little boy. Running like that—he goes around. It's half raining and half snow. . . . It was sleeting and raining, he said [when he returned to his body]. All the people were singing. . . . Then afterwards, you know, are songs, singing it like that—just like they pray this time.

He goes. Then he sees the road, a little trail. After a while he sees a river like that. He sits right by it. He sees people on the other side. They got (a wooden headdress) on too, and blanket.

He called them, "Go over here. I want to go on to the other side." Nobody listen to him.

Then after awhile, he's getting sleepy. That's his spirit. His body's way back inside his mother's house. He's yawning.

They hear it. "Somebody on the other side!" they said. "Where's the boat? . . . Take a boat and bring him in the house." . . .

"Somebody on the other side. Where's the boat?"

They got the boat. They take him to the other side.

First house they came in, his aunty's house. His aunt is right by the door over there. She's standing over here. . . . All the people were sitting in four circles around the house, the oldest in back.

The girl said, "Sit down, I'm going to tell you something." She didn't lose her mind. She thought about her people in this world. . . . "Sit down," says that woman. She just fresh yet, you know (recently dead). "Don't eat anything from these people. I'm going to help you get back on the other side. You're going home." That's what she said, that woman. "Sit down here. Don't go away from me. It's by accident I stay here. . . . I ate something, so I'm here. . . . These people is no good," she says, his father's sister. He sat beside her. . . .

"Don't eat anything. If you eat anything from them you're going to stay here."

After a while, everybody sleepy. When they were sleeping, she sneaks him over to the other side.

"Run as fast as you can. Don't think of us. After that crow (raven) sounds, you aren't going to come back. (I.e., he had to return home before the raven called, or he would never be able to do so.) He runs.

Afterwards he sees that house (his own home). He sees that corner. He wants to come in. He can't make it. After a while he stands against the corner, and they say, "He's coming to alive! He's coming to alive!" (de Laguna, 1972, pp. 775–776)

(6). The last NDE account describes a visit to Kiwa'a, the highest level of heaven, reserved for those who die by violence. An aristocratic man and his slave allowed themselves to be shot in order to go there in search of a lost crest object called a "totem pole" in the narrative.

So when they're going to look [for the crest object], they're going to go up, they shoot them—shoot both of them. So the spirit can go up to Kiwa'a. That man, he was leading. He was the first to get shot, that's why he was first. His slave was right behind him.

What he see is some berry bushes—salmonberries, thick, as big as the hand, ripe. Oh, he like to eat some, but his slave is right behind him, pushing him. "Don't touch that berries!" But he like to eat some. It looks good.

They go up there. Green grass—beautiful! And the watchman standing there, guard. Right away the watch-out man mention his name, that he came up. He see everybody run to where he come up—just a hole. Just green grass—beautiful! Woman and man running, everybody, to meet them.

They take him to the house. That house owner, the head man, he mention his name, that man. "We didn't expect this man up here," he said. "We didn't expect him. We keep the fire burning for—" I forgot his name. "We keep the fire burning for—" He mention another name—"Yisganalx. We keep the fire burning for Yisganalx." It's a different name, he mention it. "But we didn't expect this man to come. We keep the fire burning for Yisganalx."

That's what the chief said—anyway, the head house owner.

And they got a pot on the fire. I don't know the name of that ducks, in the water, diving all the time . . . small ducks like saw bills. But they stay in the sea all the time. That's the meat, they boiling it.

"But we didn't expect you," he said.

Then he said, "I didn't expect to come up here myself," he said. "I'm looking for that totem pole."

And that man answers him again, that house owner. "We don't know anything like a totem pole up here. The only thing we know is Yisaganalx is going to come, so we keep the fire burning until he come."

[The man relates the story of the lost crest object.]

Soon as they finish this story, that slave of that man just grab him on the shoulder, that man. "Let's go!"

The slave push him ahead. They run, they jump down where they come from. On the way down they see the salmonberry bushes. It's blood. When they coming up it looks like berries, but it's all blood clots. The slave knows it. He's smarter than this fellow.

And they come back down and the bodies come back alive. They don't find him, that totem pole. See, that's the way they know how it's up in heaven.

After they come back alive, little bit afterwards, that man [Yisaganalx] get killed. That's what they [the spirits in Kiwa'a] expect, they keep the fire burning. (de Laguna, 1972, pp. 772–773)

Discussion

The Tlingit belong to a distinctly different cultural group than the other Amerindian peoples from whom NDEs have been reported, and many details of the Tlingit NDEs are specific to them. It bears repeating that these ethnographic accounts may have been passed down for generations before being recorded in writing. They have the status of folklore, falling far short of modern standards of data collection and investigation in psychology and parapsychology. Nonetheless, they display several familiar patterns.

A journey along a spirit road figures in six of Wade's (2003) 11 historical accounts (from seven Amerindian cultures), as well as in the autobiographical Hopi case of Sun Chief (Talayesva, 1942) analyzed by Green (2008), and in several of the NDEs referenced by Shushan (2016). It is described in four of the five Tlingit narratives relating to the mid-level heaven (1, 2, 3, 5). In five of Wade's (2003) accounts, the experiencers (NDErs) reached the land of the dead, as they did in five of the Tlingit narratives (1, 2, 4, 5, 6). The NDErs saw deceased people in six of Wade's (2003) accounts, in Gómez-Jeria's (1993) Mapuche case, in many of those mentioned by Shushan (2016), and in all of the Tlingit narratives. Wade (2003) identified nonhuman beings in six accounts, although none appeared in the cases of Talayesva or Gómez-Jeria or in any of the Tlingit narratives.

Four of the NDErs in Wade's accounts received a commission to carry out upon returning to corporeal life, and three others created a mission for themselves. Missions are routinely given in the revitalization-movement NDEs referenced by Shushan (2016). NDErs returned with a mission in two of the Tlingit narratives (2, 3). NDErs were told to return in four of Wade's accounts as well as in Talayesva's (1942) and Gómez-Jeria's (1993) cases. The return was unintentional in two of Wade's (2003) accounts. NDErs returned by choice in two Tlingit accounts (3, 6), were sent back in two (2, 4), returned with assistance in one (5), and returned unintentionally in one (1). Partaking of spirit food was associated with the inability to return in three of the Tlingit narratives (1, 5, 6), although the consumption of food burned in a potlatch had no effect (1). NDErs interacted with the living in two of Wade's (2003) accounts and in one of the Tlingit narratives (1). NDErs perceived people and events in the material world in one of Wade's (2003) accounts, in Green's (2008), and in two of the Tlingit narratives (1, 5).

Several of these features appear also in NDEs reported from small-

scale societies in Oceania, Australia, and Africa (Counts, 1983; Kellehear, 2008, 2009; McClenon, 2006a). McClenon (2006a) noted that journeys along a path to a spirit world, encounters with the spirits of deceased persons and nonhuman beings, and returns because it was not the NDEers time to die, sometimes with commissions to perform certain activities, appeared in historical BaKongo and Basuto NDE narratives. A land of the dead located in the heavens and nonhuman spirits identified with Jesus appeared in the more Christianized accounts. Similar features turned up in accounts and cases from Australia (Berndt & Berndt, 1989; Warner, 1937), New Zealand (King, 1985), Papua New Guinea (Counts, 1983), Guam (Green, 1984), and Hawaii (Kellehear, 2001), as well as in five cases reported to Morse and Perry (1992) from contemporary Zaire.

Kellehear (2008, 2009) contrasted state-level Asian societies with hunter-gatherer and other small-scale indigenous societies, pointing to the presence or absence of a life review—present in the state-level accounts, absent in others—as being the main discriminating variable. Light and darkness impressions are unusual in NDEs from non-Western societies of all types. I think, however, that Kellehear (2008, 2009) missed something significant in the data. There appear to be two distinct subgroups of non-Western societies. In state-level societies, the deceased found themselves in some sort of celestial heaven, but in small-scale societies, the land of the dead most often lay on the same plane as the terrestrial world and only occasionally was situated below or above ground. When the land of dead was in the sky, as in many of the NDEs Shushan (2016) NDEs reported, there often were indicators of contact influences on the society.

Additionally, there were more mentions of deceased humans and fewer mentions of nonhuman beings in NDEs reported from small-scale societies than in NDEs reported from state-level societies. There were no nonhuman beings in the Tlingit accounts or in the Hopi (Talayesva, 1942) or Mapuche (Gómez-Jeria, 1993) cases, and they were unusual in the NDEs reported from small-scale societies in Africa (McClenon, 2006a), Australia (Berndt & Berndt, 1989; Warner, 1937), and Oceania (Counts, 1983; Green, 1984; Kellehear, 2001; King, 1985). Nonhuman beings were more prominent in acculturated NDEs, such as many of those that Shushan (2016) and Morse (1992) described. By contrast, nonhuman beings figured prominently in NDEs from China (Becker, 1981; McClenon, 1991), Japan (Becker, 1984; McClenon, 1991; Ohkado & Greyson, 2014), India (Pasricha, 1993, 2008; Pasricha & Stevenson, 1986), and Thailand (Murphy, 2001, n.d.).

Kellehear (2008, 2009) could discern no pattern regarding OBEs in relation to NDEs. Perceptions of the material world need not be limited to the initial phase of an NDE, so from my perspective restricting perceptions to an OBE “stage,” as analysts have often done, is misleading. Perceptions may have, but by no means always or even regularly have, included views of the NDEr’s body, and when the body was seen, the sight may have come at the end rather than at the beginning of the experience (Talayesva, 1942; Thrum, 1907/1998). During his NDE in Paris, Black Elk had the sense of flying over the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, observing a situation he could not have known about normally (Neihardt, 1932/1988). Given that perceptions of the material world may occur at any time during an NDE (see also Rivas, Dirven, & Smit, 2016), it might be wise to reconsider the relationship between OBEs and NDEs. If consciousness separates from the body during an NDE, NDEs by definition are OBEs, whether they include perceptions of the material world or not. The incidence of reported perceptions varies across individuals and cultures, but so do all NDE features, and it may be a mistake to place much emphasis on the variability of perception of the material world. That it happens at all surely is the essential point.

Three Tlingit Intermission Experiences

IE Accounts

(7). The Tlingit classify suicide as a violent death. This first IE account, from Boas (1890), tells of a man who killed himself and went to Kiwa’a and met Tahit before being reborn.

A man named Ky’itl’ā’c, who lived about seven generations ago, killed himself. When he died he saw a ladder descending from heaven, and he ascended it. At the head of the ladder he met an old watchman, who was all black, and had curly hair. He asked, ‘What do you want here?’ When Ky’itl’ā’c told him he had killed himself, the watchman allowed him to pass. Soon he discovered a large house, and saw a kettle standing in front of it. In the house he saw Tahit, who beckoned him to come in. He called two of his people (who are called Kyēwak’ā’o) and ordered him to show Ky’itl’ā’c the whole country. They led him to the Milky Way, and to a lake in which two white geese were swimming. They gave him a small stone and asked him to try and hit the geese with it. He complied with their request, and as soon as he had shot the geese they began to sing. This made him laugh, for their singing felt as though somebody tickled him. Then his companions asked him, ‘Do you wish to see Tahit’s daughters?’ When he expressed his desire they opened the cloud door, and he saw two bashful young girls beyond

[below] the clouds. When he looked down upon them he saw the tops of the trees looking like so many pins. But he wished to return to the earth. He pulled his blanket over his head and flung himself down. He arrived at the earth unhurt, and found himself at the foot of some trees. Soon he discovered a small house, the floor of which was covered with mats. He peeped into it, and heard a child crying that had just been born. He himself was the child, and when he came to be grown up he told the people of Tahit. They had heard about him before, but only then they learnt everything about the upper world. Ky'itl'a'c told that those whose heads had been cut off had their eyes between their shoulders in the upper world. (Boas, 1890, pp. 844–845)

(8). The second IE account also involves a violent death and a trip to Kiwa'a. Two men were shot and killed. One was reborn as his grandson, Qawusa. De Laguna (1972) recorded two versions of this story, of which I give only one. See de Laguna (1972, p. 774) for the other.

There were two of them [who were killed]. When they shot them, it was like blood splashed on them. . . . It was his grandfather [the grandfather of Qawusa] and another man [who were killed].

When they looked around them, there were steps coming down. They started to walk on those steps. When they came up there, they found a lot of people who had been shot before. There's nothing going on there but playing around, playing around all the time. And most of them going after water. People going after water—that's the Northern Lights.

It's cold. It's always cold up there.

They are playing something like that hockey. . . . Sometimes they jump around this—they call it (greenstone). That's the hardest rocks, kind of green color. They (the rocks) just sticks out. They jump through that, just jumping between them—just sticking out like tacks. . . .

And this man [who reincarnated as Qawusa], he jumped on one (sharp stone). And they kicked him out [of Kiwa'a] for that.

He remembered when he started to fall. And somebody said he was born again. They recognized him. They said his name, and he said something, but they were scared, so they said nothing.

When he was born, they find some birthmarks.

When he started to talk, he started telling this story, and every time he started telling the story, there's always something that happens, so he has to stop. My mother knows that story pretty well. And he never did finish that story. (de Laguna, 1972, pp. 773–774)

(9). The story of 'Askadut, from de Laguna (1972), last of the three accounts that culminate in reincarnation, is the only one related to a natural death and travel to the midlevel heaven. It is said to have occurred in an unspecified but apparently distant past. Readers are to understand that 'Askadut described his reincarnation experience when he became old enough to speak.

‘Askadut was a Sitka man who died (of smallpox, one informant believed). He did not know that he was dead. He could see his own body, sitting propped up, as they used to prop up a body before burning it. He tried in vain to get back inside his body, “to get under his cover,” but he couldn’t.

His young wife, his father and mother, his sister and brother-in-law were all in the house grieving for him. ‘Askadut tried to tell his mother and his wife that he was still alive, but they couldn’t hear him, and when he put his arms around them they just sighed, “uh, uh, uh,” with dry sobs. He became angry when he found himself unable to sleep with his wife as formerly.

His relatives had called different tribes (sibs) to come to comfort them, and they were having a feast together. ‘Askadut knew that this feast was for him, but he couldn’t eat it. He became hungry and touched his brother-in-law. “Why don’t you give me anything to eat?” This man exclaimed: “Ha, my body twitches and at the same time the fire also makes a noise.”

The fire crackled whenever the dead man spoke, but ‘Askadut was unable to take any of the food until they put some of what his wife was eating or drinking into a dish and set this in the fire.

Then they took the body out to where they were going to burn it. He followed, and was afraid that it would hurt him, but when they started to burn his body it felt to him just as if he were getting warm. He watched them burning it.

When it [his body] was all consumed, the people left, but ‘Askadut was unable to follow them. He didn’t know what was holding him back, but he stayed by the ashes until he began to think of the place where the dead people go.

So he started to walk there—in the rain and sleet, though devil-clubs and underbrush with thorns. He had a hard time, without rough clothes, or shoes or gloves to protect him. His hands became scratched and sore. He had a hard time because he had waited too long at the pyre.

Finally he came to the bank of a river, a muddy river that he couldn’t cross, and yet he knew that he was supposed to go to the other side, where he could see the village and people. He called and called to them, but they couldn’t hear. Finally he became tired and yawned. Then immediately the people heard him and became excited. They fetched him across the river in a canoe.

There were many people, a big town. He went inside one of the houses.

It is not quite clear why or how ‘Askadut left the land of the dead. MJ [one of de Laguna’s informants] said it was because “He wanted to come back to his family so bad.” According to EE [another informant], his aunt was among the recent dead and recognized him. She told him to go back and helped him across the river. . . .

He followed the river and after a hard time finally got back (near

his home?). He was tired, and sat down at the foot of a tree near the riverbank. The tree began to drip, so he moved to another, and found a dry one with a branch sticking out and a nice mossy place under it. Here he sat down, leaning against the tree. He fell asleep right there.

Here he remained for nine days. Each day the river bank caved in, a little bit at a time, and heard the splash of the mud and sand falling into the water. Soon it came close to his foot, and he thought, "I'll wait till it comes closer, then I'll move away." But he couldn't move anymore. And then it was caving away almost under him, and he thought, "Well, wait till I fall down that one, then I'll climb out of there."

And then it caved underneath him, and he fell down the bank into the water. And he heard someone say, "He's born already!"

They took the baby up. He looked around for his mother, and it was his true sister! [i.e., 'Askadut's sister].

And his [former] mother said, "Oh, my son come back! That's 'Askadut's spirit!"

"Yes, that's me. My name is 'Askadut," the baby said [when he became old enough to speak.] "I came back. You cried so much, and I heard my wife weeping, so I came back."

His wife recognized the baby as her husband, apparently by a cut or scar on his foot. And he reached for his wife with a smile.

But he was so ashamed of his sister that he wouldn't suck her breast, and they had to get a woman of a different tribe (sib, in the opposite moiety) to suckle him.

So it was from 'Askadut that they learned about the dead, and what to do when people die. (de Laguna, 1972, pp. 767-768)

Discussion

I find the similarities in structure and content between the three IEs and six NDEs to be striking. 'Askadut (9) traveled a path to the mid-level heaven, situated across a river on the terrestrial plane. Residents of the spirit village were not aware of his presence until he yawned, then sent a canoe to fetch him. 'Askadut (9) observed his mortuary potlatch, and his brother-in-law's body twitched when he tried to touch him. All three accounts (7, 8, 9) included meetings with spirits, but only in the first, describing a visit to Kiwa'a (7), were there non-human beings. Also in all three accounts the decision to reincarnate was either voluntary or assisted by another spirit. Perceptions of the material world were mentioned in two accounts (7, 9).

Ethnographies of other native North American societies contain allusions to intermission memories (Matlock & Mills, 1994), but in only two other instances known to me are they described in any detail. In one, a Winnebago shaman named Thunder Cloud recalled two

previous lives and two intermissions (Radin, 1923, 1926/1983). During the first intermission, he was taken "to the place where the sun sets." He thought about being reborn but was told to ask permission of Earthmaker, who granted it so that he could help avenge those who had killed him and his kinsmen. During the second intermission, he watched his own burial, then was led away "toward the land of the setting sun." There he found a village where he remained for four years, before being reborn a second time (Radin, 1926/1983, pp. 5–6). Here again the land of the dead was on the terrestrial plane, rather than above the earth. Thunder Cloud encountered spirits of the deceased as well as a nonhuman being, Earthmaker. At the end of Thunder Cloud's first intermission, Earthmaker approved his return to physical embodiment. During his second intermission, Thunder Cloud perceived the material world.

The other Amerindian IE comes from the eastern Kutchin (or Gwich'in), an Athapascan group in Canada's Northwest Territories. It is an instructive account because it includes clearly acculturated elements derived from Christian missionary teachings. A 6-year-old girl told her mother that after dying before, she had walked up to the sky on a steep and narrow trail until she came to the gate to heaven. There she had met St. Peter, who admitted her, and she walked on, passing many other human spirits, until she encountered Jesus. Jesus told her that it was not her time to die and sent her back to earth to be reborn as her sister (Slobodin, 1994, p. 151).

I know of no other detailed IE accounts from small-scale societies elsewhere in the world, even though reincarnation beliefs and signs appear in indigenous cultures on every continent (Matlock, 1993). However, Tlingit, Winnebago, and Kutchin IEs can be compared to those reported as part of reincarnation cases in state-level societies.

Gerald Willoughby-Meade (1928) contributed an IE in a reincarnation account he discovered in a book from 8th century China. After death, a spirit (or "soul") remained in its former house, where it observed its erstwhile family. It heard its father, Ku Huang, lament the death of his son, and it decided to return to the family. "Presently the soul felt that it was being seized and sent before an Official of the Underworld, who ordered it to be reborn as a child in the Ku household," Willoughby-Meade (1928, p. 76) recounted. Notice not only that the spirit watched the family while in its discarnate state but also that its return to embodied life was sanctioned by a nonhuman spirit in the underworld.

Iris Giesler-Petersen and I made a statistical comparison of fea-

tures of Asian and Western IEs in modern reincarnation cases, in the majority of which the previous person had been identified and the subject's statements about the previous life had been confirmed (Matlock & Giesler-Petersen, 2016). Our sample consisted of 85 IEs, 58 from Asian countries and 27 from Western countries. We found the experiences from the two world areas to be remarkably similar. We found no statistically significant differences in the presence or absence of Stage 2 or 3 intermission experiences—discarnate existence, return to a new body—or in many of the characteristics of those stages between the two world areas. A variety of spirit entities, including deceased relatives and friends and nonhuman beings, appeared in both world areas. Veridical perceptions of the material world were reported during all three stages in both world areas.

The strongest contrast Giesler-Petersen and I found between Asian and Western IEs was in the nature of the discarnate environment. Whereas Asians usually said that they stayed close to the earth, Westerners spoke of going to Heaven. A few subjects in both Asia and the West talked about moving between terrestrial and heavenly environments. The difference between the proportions of terrestrial, heavenly, and both environments in Asian versus Western IEs was highly statistically significant ($p < .000001$). This result is noteworthy, given the tendency for IEs and NDEs in small-scale societies to locate the land of the dead on the terrestrial plane. However, in the Asian IEs with terrestrial experiences, the interlife period passed in a specific real-world place, such as a pagoda or a tree, rather than in a special land of the dead (Matlock & Geisler-Petersen, 2016).

Cultural expectations clearly impact IEs just as they do NDEs. Giesler-Petersen and I noted cultural imprints not only in the representation of the discarnate environment, but also in how nonhuman beings were identified. God, Jesus, and angels regularly figured in Western IEs, whereas in Asia, the nonhuman actors were likely to be Yama, the Hindu king or god of the dead, and sundry minor deities and devas. Significantly, though, the different nonhuman entities filled the same roles in both world areas. We named these roles Gatekeeper, Escort, Entity in Charge, and Other.

When nonhuman beings appeared in Tlingit, Winnebago, and Kutchin IEs, they assumed the same roles. The intermission experiencer (IEr) in account 7 was met by a Gatekeeper at the entrance to Kiwa'a. Later he encountered Tahit, an Entity in Charge, who sent him on a tour of Kiwa'a with a pair of Escorts. The Escorts assisted in his reincarnation to a young woman who was described as a daughter

of Tahit, in the same sense that one might speak of a “child of God.” In both of Thunder Cloud’s IEs, he was met by an Escort who showed him to the land of the dead. Earthmaker, the Winnebago Entity in Charge, approved his plan to reincarnate later on. In the Kutchin case, St. Peter filled the role of Gatekeeper, and Jesus was the Entity in Charge.

When nonhuman beings appear in NDEs, it is typically in one of these roles as well. In Black Elk’s first NDE, nonhuman beings, whom he described as looking like men, acted as Escorts (Neihardt, 1932/1988). In Sun Chief’s NDE (Talayesva, 1942), his guardian spirit acted as Escort. In more acculturated accounts (Green, 1984; McClellon, 2006; Shushan, 2016), the Entity in Charge often was identified as Jesus. In small-scale societies, the roles might be filled by the spirits of deceased humans as well as by nonhuman spirits. It was usually nonhuman beings who acted as assistants in selecting parents for the next life, but in the account of ‘Askadut (9), it was a deceased aunt.

Conclusion

Much has been made of the contrast between Western and non-Western NDEs (Kellehear, 2008, 2009), but little notice has been taken of differences in subclasses of non-Western NDEs or of the similarities between NDEs and IEs. As illustrated by the Tlingit narratives, there are good reasons to view NDEs and IEs as closely related. These experiences are structurally similar, the main difference being that in NDEs, the experiencer returns to the same body in the end, whereas in IEs, death is final and the return is to a different body. Both types of experience include interaction with spirits and in both there may be perceptions of the material world. In my concluding remarks, I reflect on the implications of these observations for understanding the NDE.

First, let me say that I believe that research conducted over the last half-century—since about 1960—has established reincarnation beyond reasonable doubt (Haraldsson & Matlock, 2016; Matlock, 1990b). Most of the work has been done with young children who claim to remember having lived before (Stevenson, 2001). Their memories occur in the waking state or, less often, in dreams. Upon investigation, the people the children talked about were identified, and much of what they said happened was subsequently verified. Often the children displayed emotions appropriate to the persons whose lives they recalled, and behaved in other ways like them. Frequently, there were birthmarks and other physical signs linking the lives. The files at the Uni-

versity of Virginia contain some 1,700 cases of this sort in which the previous person has been identified (Mills & Tucker, 2013).

Children who spoke about the intermission made more verified statements about the past life and were more likely to recall more than one past life than were children who did not recall the intermission, suggesting that children with intermission memories have stronger memories over all (Sharma & Tucker, 2004). This finding does not mean their intermission narratives must be taken literally, but when children accurately describe scenes that took place after their deaths in the earlier lives (Matlock & Giesler-Petersen, 2016; Rivas, Carman, Carman, & Dirven, 2015), it does appear that somehow they were around to witness those events. At the same time, both IEs and NDEs contain a good deal of information that cannot be determined to be either fact or fantasy. Despite the cross-cultural agreement in structure and core content, there is strong evidence of cultural influence on these experiences. There is a good deal of individual variation, too. Reconciliation of these seemingly contradictory elements presents a challenge.

Because reincarnation entails survival of physical death, at least it can be asserted that IEs provide *prima facie* evidence of a discarnate existence between lives. The correspondences between NDEs and IEs increase the likelihood that NDEs are what they seem to be: experiences of consciousness freed from cerebral domination and separated from the body. If indeed that is what is occurring in NDEs, descriptions of similar phenomena should be expected under other conditions where the brain's constraints are reduced or removed; this, in fact, is the case. Fantastic terrains and discarnate spirits are apprehended in fasting and initiation rituals, ecstatic trance, the experiences of Tibetan delogs, shamanic journeys, deathbed visions, terminal lucidity, and the like (Bailey, 2001; Eliade, 1964; Kelly, Greyson, & Kelly, 2007; Nahm, 2011; Osis & Haraldsson, 2012; Rousseau, 2012).

Philosopher H. H. Price (1953) portrayed the discarnate state as dreamlike, but that depiction is at odds with what NDErs, IEs, and other experiencers describe. In a large study of NDEs at the University of Virginia hospital, researchers found that 45% of NDErs said their thinking had been "clearer than usual," and another 40% said it had been "as clear as usual" during the experience (Kelly, Greyson, & Kelly, 2007, p. 386 n16). Experiencers talked in realistic terms about the spirits they saw and interacted with, even when settings were fantastic. Some experiencers influenced living people or the ma-

terial world from the discarnate state, and some NDErs believed they had traveled to places where living people saw them as apparitions (Rivas, Dirven, & Smit, 2016, chap. 7). None of these narratives sound like dreaming, but they are what would be expected if consciousness, along with its capacities for complex thought and deliberative action, persisted from embodiment into disembodiment.

During embodied life, consciousness has both conscious and subconscious strata, and there is no reason to suppose this is not true of the discarnate mind as well. While minds are embodied, brain physiology shapes conscious awareness (Augustine, 2007b; Augustine & Fishman, 2015), but that fact does not mean that the brain generates consciousness or that it impacts the subconscious (Matlock, 2016). This last point is important, I think, because much of what makes us humans who we are derives from the subconscious, and if our subconscious minds survive our deaths, they would reasonably be expected to carry forward our memories, behavioral dispositions, convictions, beliefs, and other facets of our personalities that make the subconscious their home. The dividing line between the subconscious and conscious awareness may be more permeable in death, allowing material from the subconscious to rise into awareness more easily, but NDEs, IEs, and kindred phenomena suggest that the line does not dissolve completely.

In the disembodied state, minds are bereft of physical senses and cannot engage circumstances in the same ways as when they are embodied. Discarnate existence must be more pervasively subjective than embodied life, but it need not be entirely subjective, because perceptions and interactions are possible through what parapsychologists term “psi” (Matlock, 2016). Psi is an umbrella label for extra-sensory perception (ESP), a category that includes clairvoyance, telepathy, and psychokinesis (PK), mind over matter. Psi has been amply demonstrated in spontaneous cases and lab experiments for over 100 years, and it appears to be a fundamental property of consciousness (Matlock, 2016). If living people possess psi capabilities, it is reasonable to assume that discarnate minds do, as well. Indeed, I have noted indications of psi-based perceptions and interactions with the living in IEs. For documentation of veridical psi in NDEs, see Holden (2009) and Rivas, Dirven, and Smit (2016).

Perceptions are handled in different ways by embodied and disembodied minds. Inputs passing through physical senses are mediated by brains, but psi impressions enter subconscious minds and are processed there before being presented to conscious awareness (Marshall,

2015, pp. 394–401; Price, 1995). Augustine (2007a, 2007b, 2015b) seemed to think that discarnate perception should be as clear and accurate as physical perception, and because it sometimes is not, it must be hallucinatory. Because he considered psi abilities to be unproven (Augustine, 2015a), this conclusion is unavoidable for him, yet the distortions he cataloged (Augustine, 2007b, 2015b) looked exactly like what researchers have observed with psi (Price, 1995). Distortions of the same kind are even more pronounced in remote viewing, ganzfeld mentation, and experiments with dream telepathy, procedures designed to circumvent the brain's consciousness filters (Baptista, Derakhshani, & Tressoldi, 2015). Subconscious processing also allows cultural and individual ideas and expectations to influence material presented to conscious awareness. This point, I think, explains variations in NDE and IE phenomenology, in particular why nonhuman beings in similar roles are perceived in dissimilar, but culturally appropriate, ways, by different experiencers.

The model I am sketching supposes an objective reality to discarnate existence beyond the subjective mental states of the experiencer. Spirits of deceased humans and nonhuman entities alike are assumed to be streams of consciousness that perceive and communicate with each other via psi. Their actions are real and have real consequences for the experiencer, but they are played out on an imaginary terrain that is conditioned by an individual's beliefs and expectations carried into death. If I am right about this, there will be variations in social practices in discarnate existence, just as there are in embodied life, and absolute uniformity in any aspect of NDEs or IEs should not be expected.

My model shares with McClenon's (2002, 2006a, 2006b) ritual healing theory a willingness to take subjective experience seriously and a recognition that interpretation of these experiences in strictly materialist terms is untenable. However, whereas McClenon argued that anomalous experiences, including NDEs, have a practical benefit to those who experience them and that the capacity to have these experiences was selected for during physical evolution, I use NDEs to explore the nature of discarnate existence. I do this by grouping NDEs with IEs, which occurred after death was final and the brain was completely inoperative. IEs can be explained in naturalistic terms only with the (baseless) assumption that they are not memories but are hallucinations imagined to be memories, experienced by young children who, in many cases, also have veridical memories of previous lives. I do not mean to assert that physiology has nothing to do with

NDEs, which, unlike IEs, involve a return to the same body in the end, but physiology cannot tell the whole story. Sorting out the relative contributions of physiology, cultural influence, subconscious processing, and the objective reality of discarnate existence in NDEs will take time, but I hope I have shown that there are reasons to accept at least some NDEs as actual glimpses into the beyond.

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