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Review Article

Dialogues with Death Experiences at the End of Life

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Abstract

The fear of death, even reaching a disabling fear, is the result of the mechanistic vision of the human being, which derived from the Newtonian-Cartesian understanding of reality, leaving human knowledge in the impossibility of understanding and assimilating the ancestral experiences of human spiritual life, from which it is essential to generate spaces that consider the reintegration of the dimension of human spirituality in such a way that it is possible to incorporate into daily experience not only the physical absence of the deceased person, but also one's own finitude and the consideration of personal death. Therefore, turning our attention to phenomena such as Holotropic Breathwork, Close Encounters with Death and End-of-Life Experiences, among others, are today essential for the comprehensive care of mental health and people's health in general.

Keywords

Afterlife, Transpersonal, Spiritual life, Life and Death, Holotropic Breathwork.

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This is a highly empirical path,
you need to test it yourself,
what? everything!
Damcho Diana Finnegan

- Are you my death?
- No, I am the death of those you love and who love you.

This happened on June 25 and 26, 2023, during a holotropic breathwork retreat at the AMPYDET house (Mexican Association of Psychotherapy and Transpersonal Development), where I arrived as a stop in a long search, the result of what I would later learn was a spiritual emergency. There were several experiences with death during the retreat before receiving that message from that character in a vision during holotropic breathing, I do not remember his features, only the sensation and certainty of talking to someone else for a long time and only remembering, among others, those phrases.

Initially, I looked for the teachings of Stanislav Grof to try to understand the experience I had had during holotropic breathing; Grof points out that the existence of transpersonal experiences involves a violation of some of the most basic assumptions and principles of mechanistic science: such as the relative and arbitrary nature of all physical boundaries, non-local connections in the universe, communication through unknown means and channels, memory without material substratum, the misalignment of time, or consciousness related to all living forms (including single-celled organisms and plants), and even inorganic matter; such experiences occur during the process of deep individual self-exploration [1].

The exploration of spiritual life can be understood in four stages or phases of spiritual development: Belief, Faith, Direct experience, and Permanent adaptation. In other words, one can believe in Spirit, one can have faith in Spirit, one can directly experience Spirit, and one can become Spirit [2].

But in a universe where matter is the primary thing and life and consciousness are only its accidental products, there can be no genuine recognition of the spiritual dimension of existence. Newtonian-Cartesian science has created a very negative image of human beings, describing them as biological machines operated by instinctual drives of a bestial nature. It does not genuinely recognize higher values such as spiritual consciousness, feelings of love, aesthetic needs, or a sense of justice, which it regards as derivatives of basic instincts and commitments essentially alien to human nature. In the context of such mechanistic science, spirituality is regarded as equivalent to primitive superstition; experiences of death-rebirth sequences or memories of previous incarnations are conceptualized as severe psychotic distortions of objective reality, indicating a significant pathological process or mental illness. The separation of spirituality from the daily life of humanity has generated, among many other things, an anguishing fear of death and the difficulty, and even inability, to continue with one's own life in the face of the death of an emotionally significant person. Therefore, it is essential to generate therapeutic spaces that consider the reintegration of the dimension of human spirituality, in such a way that they can incorporate such an experience and continue with their lives, meaning the physical absence of the deceased person [1].

As you can see, I needed to turn to sources that would explain the experience I had lived. From then on, dialoguing with "Death" has been a frequent part of my spiritual life path and the moments of immersion and deepening that I have done: holotropic breathing, sacred plants, personal retreats, Day of the Dead, temazcal, dreams and in the daily life itself; I continue exploring sources that can bring me closer to understanding these experiences.

From the above, continuing with Grof [1], who has observed that transpersonal phenomena manifest connections between the individual and the cosmos, whose common denominator of these copious and ramified phenomena is the sensation on the part of the subject that his consciousness has expanded beyond the usual limits of the ego and has overcome the limitations of time and space, among which is the phenomenon of death, which, Wilber [2] points out, is basically related to human evolution as the story of a love affair between humanity and the divine, for whose understanding it is essential to consider the fascinating information from the field of thanatology that suggests, among other things, that clinically dead people frequently perceive with precision the situation that surrounds them, from platforms that are not accessible to them when they are in a state of full consciousness [1].

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are lucid events that occur when a person is so physically compromised that they would die if their condition did not improve: they are unconscious, no heartbeat is detected, breathing stops, and electroencephalographic recordings are flat. These reports indicate that people with Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) present important changes that have to do with the perception of the self; they seem, paradoxically, more alive and human: increased self-confidence and sense of purpose in life, reduced fear of death, increased spirituality as well as compassion for others and appreciation for life, as well as little interest in material possessions. They have profound life transformations that not only impact on themselves but also on their social development. In particular, it affects a center that is usually the origin of great anguish and existential difficulties: death, in the face of which fear disappears when one has experienced an NDE [3].

Not only NDEs can bring about the disappearance of the fear of death, in fact there are several researchers who show that dying is a well-established process with distinguishable stages. Pioneer in the field, Kübler-Ross [4], points out that there are various reactions to loss, but there is no typical reaction, grief is as unique as our life, indicating five stages that are possible to observe in the face of loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance; these stages frame and identify what we may be feeling, preparing us to live and cope with losses, they are by no means stages in a linear process, not everyone goes through them all or does so in a prescribed order.

Fenwick [5] points out that there are common characteristics between near-death experiences (NDEs) and end-of-life experiences (EOLs). The former are giving us a glimpse of another different reality, one that we can expect to experience when we actually die. Dying people often speak of a strong spiritual light that draws them towards it, very similar to the light at the end of the tunnel seen in an NDE. A sense of peace, including awareness of the presence of dead friends, relatives, or spiritual beings, also seem to be common features in both experiences, visions of a paradisiacal place, a beautiful pastoral landscape, entering and exiting "another reality" filled with light, love, and compassion, so beautiful and so peaceful that they are drawn to it.

What dying people describe most in the days or hours before death are visitors who often enter their room and stand or sit at the deathbed in the room, unknown people waiting at a distance and coming closer as death approaches. These deathbed visitors seem to be in real space, as although the dying person may not be able to speak, they can often indicate their presence by becoming more animated or directing attention to a particular part of the room. Typically, visions are seen only by the dying person, but sometimes other people in the room, especially children, may see them as well, and very rarely, hospice or hospital staff may see them as well. 90% of people who die consciously report that these visits are deeply comforting and reassuring [5].

Renz [6] conducted a study (pilot study N=80/ follow-up study N=600) in which it was observed that patients experience a transition to another state of consciousness beyond anxiety, ego and pain; and this transition seems to have three stages: a) Anxiety, b) struggle, c) denial/acceptance, which depends on finding meaning and dignity, facing trauma, processes that can be hindered or facilitated by family processes and maturation. This was confirmed in a study conducted by Renz in 2015, in which 135 patients of different religious affiliations/attitudes reported altered body awareness, less pain, less anxiety, greater acceptance of illness/ death and a new spiritual identity when they had spiritual care that was provided to complement the medical care they received [7].

Renz [8] and his team accompanied 80 dying cancer patients in palliative care units in two Swiss cantonal hospitals, observing:

- Most patients showed less fear and pain.
- Many seemed to have spiritual experiences and experience a transformation of perception that was only partly dependent on medication.

- Associations between fear/pain/denial/spiritual experiences and a transformation of perception.
- No trajectory showed uninterrupted distress.
- Many patients seemed to die peacefully.
- Previous near-death or spiritual/mystical experiences may facilitate the process of dying.

Dowling [9] summarizes his observations made during his work with people in their last weeks, days, hours and minutes of life: a) Dying is Safe, no matter how complicated the time of illness is, the time of dying, in itself, is safe, there is a transformation to a deeper state of consciousness and a broader vision. Their being has already moved away from the periphery of life and into the center. Many people talk about "resting in God," feeling "full of light," surrounded by the presence of deceased loved ones or beloved images of the Divine; and b) Psychologically the body makes sure that the moment of death itself is calm, "I am surprised, I feel safe." And with those who do not speak, I can see the deep relaxation in their faces and in their bodies as they approach the passage between life and death.

From where the author [9] proposes 3 stages of the death process:

- Chaos, deeply internal dynamics involved with experiencing separation and the deep fear that always accompanies the experience of separation.
- Surrender, dimensions of the sacred begin to fill consciousness.
- Transcendence, finds a "spiritual base", relaxing in the great natural peace, as if they were a hammock in which they could lie down, relax and experience great security and comfort, they live while they die.

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