

The Experience of Dying[†]

Russell Noyes, Jr.*

For whatever is truly wondrous and fearful in man, never yet was put into words or books. And the drawing near of Death, which alike levels all, alike impresses all with a last revelation, which only an author from the dead could adequately tell.

—HERMAN MELVILLE¹

NO ONE has returned from the dead and given an account of his experience. Yet reports of individuals who have nearly died are available from which something can be learned about life's final moments. Montaigne, following a serious riding accident, expressed the view that we have a way of familiarizing ourselves with death. "If we cannot reach it," he said, "we can approach it, we can reconnoiter it; and if we do not penetrate as far as its fort, at least we shall see and become acquainted with the approaches to it" (p. 268). One approach, involving a rapidly unfolding experience that terminates in a mystical state of consciousness, appears to be unique and will be the subject of this presentation. An attempt will be made to characterize this particular dying experience, to offer a psychodynamic interpretation of it, and to suggest certain lines of inquiry. The psychodynamic interpretation may provide a framework for understanding and interpreting a final stage in the dying process. An examination of factors influencing the emergence and subsequent interpretation of the experience may point to ways of manipulating it to advantage. Though speculative, this article is offered as a stimulus to further study of an important subject.

Accounts of the subjective experiences of persons exposed suddenly to the threat of death are available from varied sources both clinical and autobiographical.² These accounts have certain characteristics in common and break down naturally into successive phases which may be called resistance,

life review, and transcendence. Of course, not every account contains all three phases and not every one follows the same distinct sequence. I have presented a series of these experiences in a previous article. Certain accounts are particularly illustrative of the phases which can be identified.

² See Heim; Heywood; Noyes; Osis; Stevenson.

* Dr. Noyes (MD Univ. of Ind. 59) is Associate Professor of Psychiatry, University of Iowa College of Medicine.

[†] I am indebted to Dr. Ian Stevenson for his review and criticism of this manuscript.

This work was supported in part by NIMH Grant No. MH12631.

¹ *Moby Dick*; p. 473.

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The initial phase, resistance, which includes recognition of the danger, fear, struggle, and finally acceptance of death, is perhaps best illustrated by Hunter, who reported the case of a nurse who suffered an anaphylactic reaction to penicillin. The author, a psychoanalyst, reported his patient's experience as follows:

Being a nurse, she was aware . . . of the occurrence of penicillin allergy, and when she took the tablet, the thought had crossed her mind that she might be allergic to penicillin. In the car, when her breathing began to become difficult, she realized what was happening and she experienced frantic fear, which, however, soon passed. (She would never fear dying again, she said.) She felt intense sympathy for her husband. Then she felt guilty that she was putting him through this ordeal. She was ashamed. It felt to her now (post hoc) that it had been partly escape from her husband and partly revenge, but really she had had no control over it. She remembered a "last violent reaction" in which she had fought desperately against it, but she was not afraid, and then she had given in, knowing she wanted it (death). [p. 86]

At the point of acceptance the second, or life review, phase began, which subsequently gave way to a third, consisting of mystical phenomena. This example is typical and deserves to be viewed as a whole.

She had then witnessed, in rapid succession, a great many scenes from her life. They seemed in retrospect to start from about the age of five. She remembered the impression of vivid color. She had seen a beloved doll that she had had and was struck by how bright blue the glass eyes were. There was also a picture of herself on her bright red bicycle on the equally bright green lawn. She was confident that her whole life was not pictorially represented, only some scenes from her childhood and she emphasized that it was all ecstatically happy.

Her next memory was of a state of "bliss" and of "ecstasy." There was a picture of the Taj Mahal in which she was deeply, idyllically engrossed. It was a picture that she must have seen on several occasions—the usual one taken from the

end of the lily pond in front. It was colored, the pond and lily pads blue and green, the minarets and the dome a very lovely gold and cream. She became aware of people trying to wake her up and felt resentful and irritated. She wanted to be left alone with her beautiful dream of the Taj Mahal. [p. 86]

The life review phase, which follows submission to the experience, is illustrated in some detail in the following account of a Zurich geology professor, Albert Heim. While climbing in the Santis Mountain Range, Heim slipped from the edge of a precipitous cliff. He claimed that it was immediately clear to him that he would fall helplessly and quite probably to his death:

What followed was a series of singularly clear flashes of thought between a rapid, profuse succession of images that were sharp and distinct. Thoughtful recollections mixed themselves thoroughly with exhilarating perceptions, perhaps also hallucinations. I could not say what the exact succession was but I believe that it was almost instantaneous. I could perhaps compare it best to images from a film sprung loose in a projector or to the rapid sequence of dream images.

As though I looked out of the window of a high house, I saw myself as a seven year old boy going to school. I then saw myself in the 4th grade classroom with my beloved teacher Weisz. I acted out my life as though I were an actor on stage upon which I looked down from the highest gallery in the theater. . . . I saw myself industriously working in the sketching studio of the Canton School, matriculating examinations, making a mountain journey, modeling my Todi-relief, and sketching my first panorama from Zurichberg. My sisters and especially my wonderful mother, who was so important in my life, were around me. Suddenly, through the images of the moment, there came the consideration, "In a moment I will be dead." Then I saw a telegram or letter messenger who gave my mother, at the door of her house, the notice of my death. She together with the other members of my family took the news with the deepest sorrow, but with pious greatness of soul. They showed no complaining, wailing, or weeping. In the same way I myself felt no trace of anxiety or pain, but

went to death matter-of-factly and without dread. It all had to happen that way; it seemed eminently correct.

Noteworthy, I had not the slightest worry about securing, by entreaty, the assistance of God. I had the feeling of submission to necessity. Then I saw arching over me—my eyes were directed upwards—a beautiful blue heaven filled with small violet and roseate clouds. Solemn music sounded in powerful chords, as though from an organ. I felt myself go softly backwards into this magnificent heaven—without anxiety, without grief. It was a great and glorious moment! [Pfister, p. 434]

One may readily identify in this account the typical review phenomenon, the split of the self from its bodily representation, and fantasies of events which might follow death. Heim, stimulated by his experience, over a 25-year period collected the accounts of survivors of mountain climbing and similar accidents. He claimed that in 95 percent of the cases a similar mental state occurred, which he characterized in the following way:

No grief was felt, nor was there paralyzing fright of the sort that can happen in instances of lesser danger (i.e., outbreak of fire). There was no anxiety, no trace of despair, no pain; but rather calm seriousness, profound acceptance, and a dominant mental quickness and sense of surety. Mental activity became enormous, rising to a hundred-fold velocity or intensity. The relationships of events and their probable outcomes were overviewed with objective clarity. No confusion entered at all. Time became greatly expanded. The individual acted with lightning-quickness in accord with accurate assessment of his situation. In many cases there followed a sudden review of the individual's entire past; and finally the person falling often heard beautiful music and fell in a superbly blue heaven containing roseate cloudlets. Then consciousness was painlessly extinguished, usually at the moment of impact.

We have reached the conclusion that death through falling is subjectively a very pleasant death. . . . Those of our friends who have died in the mountains have, in their last moments, reviewed their individual pasts in states of transfiguration. They

have fondly thought of their loved ones. Elevated above corporeal grief, they were under the sway of noble and profound thoughts, heavenly music, and a feeling of peace and reconciliation. They fell through a blue and roseate, magnificent heaven—then everything was suddenly still.

Pfister wrote an early psychoanalytic interpretation of "shock thoughts and fantasies," taking as his subject matter this collection of accounts by Heim.

Because of the ineffable character of these experiences, especially in their final stage, it may be appropriate to turn to those gifted in expression—the poets—for their assistance. Caresse Crosby leaves a moving description of what happened when she narrowly escaped drowning.

When my head plunged beneath the water's surface, I took one long frightened gulp and I never got another breath of air, my lungs expelled once and refilled with tide water. The blood rushed from my toes to my nose and suddenly my head seemed to expand and explode, but softly as though it were a cotton ball fluffing out and out and out. Into my ears the waters poured strange sea lullabies and little by little, there beneath the flood a dazzling prismatic effulgence cleared my vision—not only did I see and hear harmony, but I understood everything. And slowly, as a bubble rises to the surface, I rose to the surface, rose up through the wooden platform, rose to where I could dominate the whole scene spread out beneath me. I watched my father at work on his boat, my brothers deathly frightened hanging to my spindly heels and I, my hair like seaweed pulled flat against the submerged bottom of the float. Thus, while I drowned I saw my father turn and act; I saw my frightened brothers run homewards; I saw the efforts to bring me back to life and *I tried not to come back*.

It was the most perfect state of easeful joy that I ever experienced, then or since. There was no sadness or sickness from which I wished to escape. I was only seven, a carefree child, yet that moment in all my life has never been equaled for pure happiness. Could I have glimpsed, while drowned (for I was drowned), the freedom of eternal life? One thing I know, that

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Nirvana does exist between here and the hereafter—a space of delight, for I have been there. [pp. 18-19]

Of note are vivid perceptual phenomena, a separation of the self from its bodily representation, reluctance to part with the experience, and possibly a spiritual influence upon the experient's later life. These too are characteristic features.

The final phase is transcendence. Jung's account, presented in his autobiography, is particularly illustrative. In it all the characteristic elements of mystical consciousness are vividly described. These include: ineffability, a feeling of unity, transcendence of time and space, a sense of truth, loss of control, intense emotion, and transiency.³ Following a heart attack and in a state of semiconsciousness Jung tells us that for a time he "hung on the edge of death." At one point during that period he found himself floating away from the earth, which he pictured as if from a thousand miles distant bathed in a gloriously blue light. As his experience progressed he envisioned himself standing before a temple, the door of which was surrounded by a wreath of flames.

As I approached . . . I had the feeling that everything was being sloughed away; everything I aimed at or wished for or thought, the whole phantasmagoria of earthy existence, fell away or was stripped from me—an extremely painful process.

As he approached the temple he said:

I had the certainty that I was about to enter an illuminated room and would meet there all those people to whom I belong in reality. There I would at last understand—this too was a certainty—what historical nexus I or my life fitted into.

He then, for a time, saw himself in an enchanted garden for pomegranates where all was beautiful and peaceful. Of the entire experience he said:

³ See James, pp. 380-381; and Stace.

It is impossible to convey the beauty and intensity of emotion during these visions. They were the most tremendous things I have ever experienced. . . . I can describe the experience only as the ecstasy of a nontemporal state in which present, past, and future are one. Everything that happens in time had been brought together into a concrete whole. . . . One is interwoven into an indescribable whole and yet observed it with complete objectivity. [Jung. pp. 289-298]

RESISTANCE

Recognition that death is imminent precipitates a brief though violent struggle, often accompanied by marked anxiety, between urges for active mastery on the one hand and passive resignation on the other. Disorganizing panic is delayed at this point but may make a painful emergence once the threat has passed and the experience terminated. Where even a slight possibility of survival remains, alertness to the dangerous environment is enhanced and energy available for both physical and mental activity may be enormously increased. Just as unusual feats of physical strength are reported by persons exposed to extreme danger, so a tremendous speeding and apparent sharpening of mental activity may occur as well.

The upsurge of life-saving energy is countered, it seems, by a powerful urge to surrender—hence, the inner sense of struggle. Persons dying more gradually similarly report that as their energy for life wanes, their life seems dependent upon a struggle to maintain it. It is as though their will to live sustains them and as though without it they might simply let themselves go and, in a sense, will their death. The extent to which the will to live is responsible for the length of life is probably an unanswerable question. The will to live may itself be a manifestation of the energy that sustains life.

At the point of surrender fear subsides and a feeling of tranquility, often profound, develops. With the end of uncertainty, anxiety falls away and the event of death itself is faced with calm. Poe, whose stories represent extensive explorations into human consciousness, related this emotion to the losing of uncertain hope. A sailor in "A Descent Into the Maelstrom" found himself descending into a giant ocean whirlpool and about to be dashed into its depths. At that point:

Having made up my mind to hope no more, I got rid of a great deal of that terror which unmanned me at first. . . . I began to reflect how magnificent a thing it was to die in such a manner, and how foolish it was of me to think of so paltry a consideration as my own individual life, in view of so wonderful a manifestation of God's power. . . . After a little while I became possessed with the keenest curiosity about the whirl itself. I positively felt a *wish* to explore its depths, even at the sacrifice I was going to make. [p. 135]

With return of hope he experienced a return of terror, which caused his "limbs to tremble and heart to beat heavily."

Persons who have decided to kill themselves have also reported that acceptance of death is accompanied by a tremendous sense of peace. Such an emotion may result from a release of energy that accompanies giving in to death. This energy may account for both the tranquil or pleasurable emotion of the experiences under discussion and the brief, often remarkable, clearing of consciousness that has been observed to precede death from chronic illness (Pfister).

REVIEW

Immediately, as fear is replaced by calm and as active mastery is replaced by passive surrender, a curious splitting of the self from its bodily representation may occur. Commonly

referred to as "out-of-the-body" phenomena by students of parapsychology, examples of this splitting represent an interesting negation of death. The subject may correctly view his body as near death but, being outside of it, he witnesses the scene with detached interest. Freud, commenting on our tendency to eliminate death from life, pointed out:

Our own death is indeed unimaginable, and whenever we make the attempt to imagine it we can perceive that we really survive as spectators. Hence . . . at bottom no one believes in his own death, or to put the same thing in another way, in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality. [1915, pp. 304-305]

In these accounts from persons suddenly exposed to the threat of death can be found dramatic confirmation of Freud's assertion. The threat of death is reduced to a threat of bodily annihilation. By dissociating these aspects of the self the reality of death is excluded from consciousness. Accounts in which this out-of-the-body experience is a very prominent feature usually do not contain the other phases described, suggesting that it may by itself represent an adequate defense against the threat of death.

The review of life or "panoramic" memory, regularly a part of these experiences, often encompasses a person's entire past. Unusually vivid scenes of some or many of the events of his life flash through his mind in rapid succession. Occasionally he will gain the impression that all his memories are laid out at once before him. Typically they are accompanied by pleasurable emotions appropriate to the memories. Distressing scenes accompanied by painful emotions have been reported less frequently. Hunter interpreted this review of memories as a rapid regression to early childhood and suggested that the abandonment of striving to maintain

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object relationships and the acceptance of passivity result in an intrinsically joyous or pleasurable state.

A fleeting return to memories of the past may result from the sudden loss of future time orientation. While regression leads to an altered sense of time, the opposite cause and effect sequence may be operative in these instances. Loss of the future may necessitate regression. As persons approach the end of their lives, they find that time seems to pass at an ever-quickenning pace and that as their investment in the future is withdrawn they turn toward reminiscence. In a like fashion persons suddenly confronted with an end to their lives may experience an intense investment in their past lives. The narrow focusing of vital energy upon this sector of experience may account for the intensity and vividness of early memories encountered. Eventually such a retreat from the future brings the individual to an existence in the present moment. There, as in childhood, he loses his appreciation for the threat of death and effectively excludes it from awareness.

The return of vivid early memories bears a striking resemblance to a certain and, according to Parkes, pathognomonic feature of grief. Memories of deceased persons, quite clear and of such intensity as to resemble perceptions, are characteristically reported during the acute stages of grief and represent the subject's clinging to or search for the lost loved one. Similarly persons about to lose their lives hold fast to memories of their existence, memories which are in reality a part of their being. Thus, as seems natural, life arises to a sharper focus and is clung to as more precious just at the moment it is about to be lost.

The review is remarkable not only for its vividness but also for the unique perspective upon life that it brings. A

man's existence becomes complete and unalterable with his death—not before it. At this moment a life, while stripped of potentialities, is rescued into the actuality of the past. In the existential sense it is saved from being transitory. Once an actuality it remains one forever. Through the ages death has been recognized as a climactic moment for this very reason—it represented a last opportunity to attain or defend the aim held highest. In a final judgmental review the dying man, in a passionate affirmation of the transcendent meaning to his existence, thoroughly integrates it into the universal order which he embraces. His spiritual aspirations thereby assert themselves. DeQuincey, commenting somewhat ominously on the review phenomenon, said that “the dread book of account of which the scriptures speak is contained in the mind of each individual” (p. 206). A review in terms of good and evil will naturally give rise, among the religious, to fantasies of heaven and hell.

TRANSCENDENCE

As the life review continues, the individual may, from an increasingly distant perspective, view his life in its entirety and in every detail simultaneously. Here he may be impressed with his good and bad characteristics. But as he enters the final phase he relinquishes this view and experiences himself in a new manner. In so doing he enters a region or dimension which he finds foreign. The ineffable quality of the experience may stem from its uniqueness, the intensity of emotion that accompanies it, or the inadequacy of language to express it.

A second characteristic of this phase is transcendence of time. Jung spoke of his experience as one of a “non-temporal state.” The individual, as he

becomes aware of a change in his orientation toward time, may feel as though he were outside of time, in eternity, or beyond the past and future. The experience which occurs in the briefest span represents complete immersion in the present moment, a phenomenon accompanied by an altered sense of time. A related characteristic is that of transcendence of space and of individual identity. A sense of oneness or unity with other human beings and the entire universe develops. When the bounds of time and space are thus transcended, the experient may feel as though he were traveling to a previously unknown realm.

A sense of truth is common in this phase. James called this feeling of having achieved insightful knowledge or illumination its "noetic quality." (pp. 380-381). Writing about mystical states in the religious sense he said, "They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect." And according to Pahnke this quality is expressed in assertions, "...of having found the answer to the ancient query, 'What am I?', of having intuited the harmonious structure of the universe, of having experienced the primacy of love and the brotherhood of man, or of having realized the reality of life that transcends temporal death, (p. 175).

Another characteristic feature is that of loss of control. This may be described, as in Jung's account, as relinquishing one's hold on wordly reality. Professor Heim reported a "feeling of submission to necessity" (p. 430). James gave this element the term "passivity" and spoke of a person feeling as though his "will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power" (pp. 380-381). This surrender is usually accompanied, as in the second stage, by emotions of extreme calm or ecstasy.

The interpretation of mystical states of consciousness, of which those occurring among the dying are typical examples, has generally been the province of philosophers and theologians. But because they are facts of human experience they demand scientific scrutiny as well. James expressed his conviction on this matter as follows:

... our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness, as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. [p. 388]

Freud, in *The Future of an illusion*, explained the development of an oceanic feeling, which is akin to the mystical consciousness, on the basis of the ego's surrender to passive-receptive impulses, resulting in regression to an archaic stage of personality development prior to differentiation of the ego. According to psychoanalytic theory, therefore, the mystical state represents the blissful surrender of the ego as it regresses toward the womb. It, therefore, represents the end product of an adaptive process. However, interpretations of mystical phenomena have ranged from the physiologic to the spiritual and continue to spark controversy. James, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, gives us tempering words regarding this matter which are worthy and just as reasonable today as they were when he wrote them three quarters of a century ago:

It is evident that from the point of view of their psychological mechanism ... mysticism springs from ... that great subliminal

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or transmarginal region of which science is beginning to admit the existence, but of which so little is really known. That region contains every kind of matter: "seraph and snake" abide there side by side. To come from thence is no infallible credential. What comes must be sifted and tested, and run the gauntlet of confrontation with the total context of experience just like what comes from the outer world of sense. Its value must be ascertained by empirical methods, as long as we are not mystics ourselves. [p. 426]

INQUIRY

Most accounts of mystical dying experiences have come from persons who, in a state of good health, were suddenly threatened with death. Perhaps the first question to be asked regarding these mystical dying experiences should deal with their frequency. Do they typically accompany physical dissolution regardless of the rapidity, mode, or conscious recognition of dying? Though uncommunicated, do they nevertheless occur with some frequency in the final moments of life? Subjective reports suggest that the chief prerequisite to their full development is the perception of imminent death. As long as escape is possible, energy will be devoted to attempts at active mastery. The danger, therefore, must be external or of sufficient intensity to convince the person that he is about to die. Victims of drownings, falls, automobile accidents, anaphylactic reactions, even suicides, may regularly have these experiences. From these groups a systematic collection of accounts should be attempted. Victims of cardiac arrests may not have such experiences unless convinced of their closeness to death (Dobson). How accurately do most of the dying identify their final hour? Persons succumbing to chronic disease are often aware of their fate and may, therefore, have mystical encounters. The rapturous, transfigured expressions observed on the deathbeds of a century

ago and interpreted as tokens of beatific visions were, perhaps, accompaniments of a mystical state of consciousness (Clarke, p. 259).

It is apparent that the potential for the development of this type of experience resides within most, if not all, persons, whether they be exceptional or not. What then is the combination of factors necessary to precipitate them? The variables of age, sex, and temperament should have an influence. Youth, femininity, and artistic inclination should favor them. Certainly persons who are prone to develop mystical experiences under other circumstances should be more likely to develop them while dying. Maslow has found, for example, that emotionally controlled, rational (compulsive) personalities are not prone to peak-experiences (p. 22). These experiences are similar to those being discussed.

Answers to questions such as these must come from study of mystical states of consciousness occurring under other circumstances. It is worthy of note in this connection that persons who have experienced mystical consciousness, both naturally occurring and artificially induced, have expressed what happened to them in terms of death and rebirth. This "death" experience has been described as pleasurable and has led to removal of fear of death (Maslow, p. 76). Here then is fertile ground for further inquiry. LSD has provided a means for producing mystical states of consciousness. It is of interest that the complete LSD experience is quite similar to that under discussion (Sherwood et al.; Stevenson). By rigorous methods it should be possible to determine which subjects will have mystical experiences when given LSD and what effect this may subsequently have upon them. While the experiences themselves cannot be studied, their effects can be discovered through

the use of certain measures of personality and attitude.

Quite naturally LSD has been administered to dying patients, presumably to offer them an opportunity to experience dying under supervised conditions, and to aid them, in this way, to prepare for death. Kast reported upon the results of administering LSD to 80 terminal patients suffering from malignant disease. He claimed that 90% gained a special insight into or perspective upon their existence and that many experienced changes in philosophical or religious approach to dying. Cohen commented upon similar effects in an anecdotal article. Pahnke et al. reported positive psychological effects using psychedelic peak therapy in 14 of 22 depressed patients with metastatic disease. Effects included reduction in depression, anxiety, and fear of death, and improved family relationships. These investigators further observed that those patients who underwent peak experiences improved most dramatically. Greater tranquility and acceptance of the prospect of dying were reported and emphasized by each of these authors. The patients seemed to discover, just as Montaigne had, that dying need not be dreadful (p. 272). And they discovered it in the same way that he did—by trying it out. Many claimed additional benefit from the transcendent perspective upon life's termination which was revealed to them. From this heretofore unfamiliar vantage point they seemed to look upon death with greater acceptance.

The difficulties of LSD research are enormous and the possibility of utilizing this agent as an adjunct in the treatment of dying patients seems remote. Still the effects of the drug upon the dying are at least of academic interest. Until a controlled study is undertaken it cannot be assumed that reported effects are not merely the re-

sult of suggestion and the salutary influence upon dying persons of a new and mysterious treatment. The drug needs to be administered under blind conditions following instruction to each subject to the effect that he will be given an opportunity to experience dying in clear consciousness and assisted by a trustworthy guide. He should know what to anticipate and how to conduct himself during the experience and he should know what benefits he might expect to derive from it. There should be a matched control group given a placebo. The effects upon those achieving mystical consciousness should be compared with the effects upon those not achieving it. For collection of adequate data, each patient should have knowledge of his prognosis and show a willingness to discuss it.

What should dying men be helped to achieve in the last stage of their lives? According to existential philosophy the goal is transcendence of death. Tolstoy provides an example in "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" of a man who, in the course of dying, triumphed over the futility of his empty and meaningless life of social conformity and who, in a final mystical experience, developed love toward his family and transcended death.

... it became clear to him that all he had been tortured by and been unable to throw off was now falling away of itself, falling away on two sides, ten sides, all sides at once. . . . He searched for his accustomed terror of death and could not find it. Where was death? What was death? There was no fear because there was no death. There was light instead of death. [p. 71]

Ivan Ilyich, aided by his confrontation with death, changed the meaning of his entire life and lifted himself to a previously unattained level of personality development. This example suggests that dying harbors potential for personality growth and that a mystical

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experience may provide a vehicle for it. Eisler, for one, departed from the traditional psychoanalytic view that maximal ego development was achieved during adolescence when he suggested that a state of greater individualization might be achieved along the terminal pathway than had been achieved previously (pp. 51-58). He felt that some individuals achieved structural change in their last hour which elevated them above their preceding level. He felt that the dying person might become more tolerant toward himself and thus achieve a degree of harmony that he had not enjoyed during a lifetime. Consciousness of the approaching end might thus enable him to take a more detached and humble view of himself and of life, and even to see the futility of what he had previously held to be extremely important. The moment of termination might, therefore, determine the value and meaning of an entire life.

Erikson, who described a lifelong succession of developmental stages, saw in the final one potential either for ego integrity or for despair. By ego integrity he meant a combination of self knowledge, acceptance, and completeness. The individual who had achieved ego integrity was one who had come to know and respect himself, to accept his life without regret, and to view his decline and death as appropriate. He was also one who had come to recognize that his entire life had been shaped to an extent by its ultimate termination and that society, as well as nature, followed a pattern of growth

and decline, birth and death. In this and a variety of other ways he would have learned to transcend himself and consequently his death.

Transcendence is, in a large measure, achieved by removing many of the artificial divisions which people impose upon the world in their effort to simplify and master it. Paradoxically life and death, rather than being dichotomous, are inseparably interwoven and, like joy and sorrow, each is a condition for the other. Not only is death a limiting condition but it so shapes the whole of existence that life without it becomes inconceivable. In "White Jacket or the World in a Man-of-War," Melville gives a fictional account which seems to point to the enriching contrast between life and death. A sailor who nearly drowned felt that he had experienced life and death together at a moment when he hovered between them. Having plunged from the yardarm into the sea he exclaimed:

What wild sounds then rang in my ear! One was a soft moaning, as of low waves on the beach; the other wild and heartlessly jubilant, as of the sea in the height of a tempest. Oh soul! thou then heardest life and death: as he who stands upon the Corinthian shore hears both the Ionian and the Aegean waves. [p. 497]

Perhaps it is this kind of transcendent perspective that a mystical encounter may provide.

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHIATRY
UNIVERSITY OF IOWA
COLLEGE OF MEDICINE
500 NEWTON ROAD
IOWA CITY, IOWA 52240

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