

Intimations of Mortality: Three Case Studies

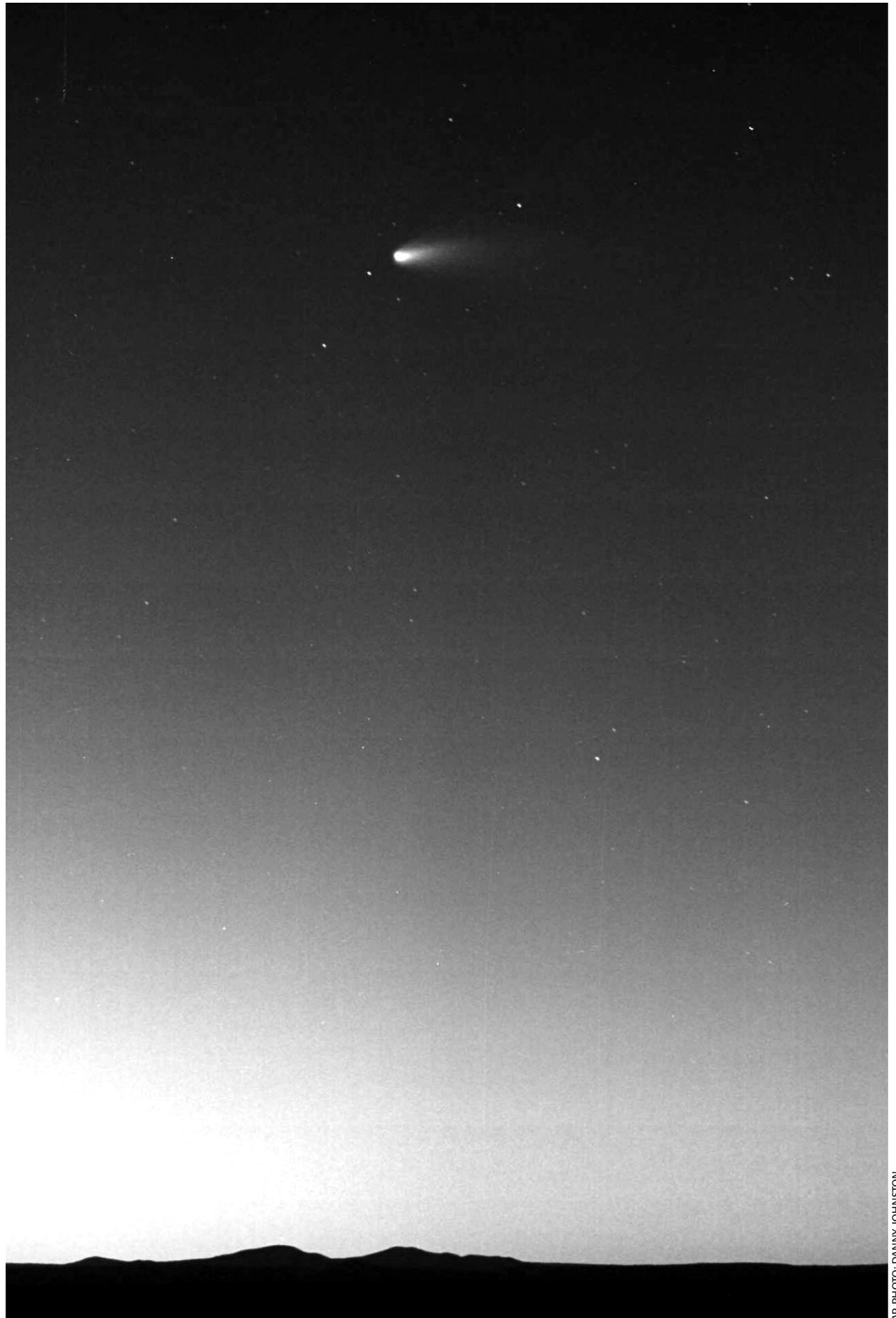
The Ingersoll Lecture for 2001–02

by **Huston Smith**

The terms of the Ingersoll Lecture do not require that there be any sequential connection between them, but Carol Zaleski's lecture last year, "In Defense of Immortality," sets the stage for mine so perfectly that in my credulous moments I could be led to believe that, unbeknownst to her, that was the hidden intent behind the matters she chose to deal with. And if she would like to join this fanciful game she could with equal right claim that I have chosen my topic to complete what she began, thereby making of our lectures a brace. Our lectures work the same street: eschewing proof, which is impossible in this area, they both seek to remove obstacles to believing in immortality. At the same time they complement each other by working the two sides of the street, hers the theoretical side and mine the empirical.

There is a second way our two lectures can be paired—we both spin off from William James's 1898 Ingersoll Lecture, while again in different ways—she from his "will to believe" and I from the "radical empiricism" that his exceptional generosity of mind led him to. He titled his Ingersoll Lecture "On Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine," and I have already mentioned that Professor Zaleski continued that trajectory by unmasking the shallowness of some theoretical objections to immortality that have gathered force in the century that separates us from James. Specifically she showed that those objections have been accepted by the media makers more for psychological than for logical reasons; immortality has been deemed improbable because science disallows it. The unexamined premise here, which dominated the twentieth century but is now becoming more untenable by the hour I am tempted to say, is that science discloses the whole of reality. This pithy epitomization of Professor Zaleski's lecture does not do justice to the subtlety with which she deals with her important theme, most importantly and courageously the black eye she gives twentieth century theologians for going along with this cultural trend instead of opposing it. But I must stop talking about Zaleski and get on with what I myself have to say.

*Huston Smith has taught philosophy and religion at MIT, Syracuse, and Berkeley. His most recent book is *Why Religion Matters* (Harper San Francisco). This lecture was given at HDS on October 18, 2001.*



AP PHOTO: DANNY JOHNSTON

I have already indicated that I will be picking up on James's radical empiricism, and this is far trickier turf, for it requires talking about paranormal phenomena that are in line with James's interests in seances in Emerson Hall—interests that his academic successors found so unacceptable that Ralph Barton Perry, James's literary executor, omitted from his edition of *The Complete Works of William James* his essays on fringe phenomena without even acknowledging the omission. I shall be considering here three paranormal phenomena: a savant, Emanuel Swedenborg; a phenomenon, near-death experiences; and third, experiences that used to be called psychedelic but that serious scholars now refer to as entheogenic.

I begin with Swedenborg.

In tagging Swedenborg a savant I use that epithet loosely. If I were speaking to an audience of committed Swedenborgians, his accounts of Heaven and Hell would fall on our ears not as intimations of immortality but as the truth of the matter as God revealed it to his latest prophet. As it is, I am approaching Swedenborg empirically, from this side of the divide, to see how far we can move toward believing his reports of Heaven and Hell without resorting to divine revelation. This requires recognizing him to have had an extraordinary talent ordinary people lack, which is where the notion of savants comes in, for that is the key denotation of the word. Space allows only four examples.

- Thomas Fuller, a late eighteenth-century Virginia slave, could barely count, yet when asked how many seconds a man who had lived for 70 years 17 days 12 hours had lived, he answered after a minute and a half's reflection, 2,210,500,800. When Benjamin Rush, the physician who wrote a classic paper on Fuller, told him that his calculation was a bit off, the slave said, "But massa, you forget the leap years."

- Dr. Downs of Down's syndrome fame studied a boy who read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and recited it back word for word without having the slightest idea of what the book was about.

- Advances in knowledge of how the brain works may demystify these first two examples by way of eidetic imagery which converts in the first case numbers and in the second words into seeing. And if hearing, too, can get cross-wired to seeing, eidetic imagery may turn out to explain my third savant, Leslie Lemke who could repeat note for note compositions, including original ones, that pianists in audiences came forward to play.

- However, nothing in our current canons of knowledge can explain the performance of the fourth savant I shall cite. He crossed my path only last spring through a personal friend whose top-of-the-line harp was stolen. Through the networking of her mother, a dowser, she finally reached Harold McCoy, who lives in a trailer in Fayetteville, Arkansas. McCoy asked to be sent a street map of Oakland on which he targeted the house where the stolen harp was found to be hidden.

I find such bizarre talents lending

credence to James's hypothesis, echoed by Bergson and Aldous Huxley, that the human mind is more like a reducing valve than a generator, one through which Mind-at-Large lets trickle only the kind of information that is necessary for us to survive on the material plane. Approaching the mind from that side enlarges our whole notion of what it is to be human and makes it easier for us to

lenses and founded several sciences including crystallography.

At the age of 56 he turned inward to explore his dreams, and he ended up leaving us what may be the largest and oldest series of interpreted dreams. In his day the spiritual practices of Hinduism and Buddhism were unknown in the West so he developed his own spiritual practices based on reduced breath-

his desk, which proved to be the case. In this case the deceased husband was the only person in existence who knew where the receipt was.

Turning now to what Swedenborg reported concerning the afterlife, I must be distressingly brief. This is what he saw:

The moment the heart stops we enter the spiritual world. There we have

At the age of 56 Swedenborg turned inward to explore his dreams, and he ended up leaving us what may be the largest and oldest series of interpreted dreams. In his day the spiritual practices of Hinduism and Buddhism were unknown in the West so he developed his own spiritual practices based on reduced breathing and intense concentration. It was in the midst of all this that God—he was a devout Christian and took the Bible as his rule of life—came to him to announce that he was going to actually show him the afterworld. For the next 27 years he visited Heaven and Hell daily.

give credence to extraordinary phenomena such as Swedenborg presents us with. If the representatives I have listed can perform "miracles" of these sorts, is there anything but prejudice to cause us to reject out of hand the possibility that Emmanuel Swedenborg was a savant whose clairvoyance extended into the afterlife?

Two important differences separate Swedenborg from the savants that psychologists study, however. First, the talents of typical savants surface in persons who are seriously retarded in one way or another, whereas Swedenborg flourished on every human front. Second, the talents of other savants relate to things of this world—mathematical calculations, musical prowess, and the like—where accuracy can be checked, whereas the referents of Swedenborg's reports of the afterlife are off the empirical map. Both of these differences require elaboration.

Far from being retarded, Swedenborg was one of the most remarkable men history registers. When Alfred Binet designed the Stanford-Binet intelligence test he looked for the most brilliant persons who ever lived. Swedenborg was listed among these few. Vocationally he was an overseer of Sweden's major mining industry, but his life was spent learning all there was in one field after another. He published an incredible 108 works in science before he began to look at psychology and religion. It would be fair to say that in the mid-eighteenth century he appeared to know everything there was to be known in the Western world. He was the first to formulate the nebular hypothesis and did remarkable work on human anatomy. He ground his own microscopic

ing and intense concentration. It was in the midst of all this that God—he was a devout Christian and took the Bible as his rule of life—came to him to announce that he was going to actually show him the afterworld. For the next 27 years he visited Heaven and Hell daily and recorded what he found in his five-volume *Spiritual Diary*. To round off his biography, he was a baron who served in his country's House of Lords. As a nobleman, scientist, and spiritual explorer, he was welcomed in social gatherings. His conduct was exemplary in every respect and he was a paragon of self-effacing modesty.

On the second point, which concerns verification, it is true that Swedenborg's visits to Heaven and Hell are not open to public verification. Still, *some* of his paranormal sightings were checkable. To mention only three of these, at a social gathering 300 miles from his home in Stockholm, he became visibly agitated. When asked what was wrong, he said that a fire was raging in Stockholm. The fire was brought under control only two doors from his house, just as he had reported. Second, he predicted months in advance while he was in perfect health, the day and hour of his death. These two cases show only that Swedenborg was clairvoyant, but the third bears directly on his claim to have been in touch with the other world. A widow who was being charged for an expensive set of silver that her husband had left her asked Swedenborg to contact her deceased husband. He did, and her husband told her that the receipt showing that he had paid for the set was in a hidden compartment in

spiritual bodies which function much like our former material ones. Life there is at first so similar to life on earth that some may even need to be instructed that they have died. This World of Spirits is a temporary stopping place. Its essential function is to show us what we really are inwardly. Angels help us here, and on the basis of their instructions we decide whether Heaven or Hell is most suited to us. This resembles the Day of Judgment in the world's religions except that it is more psychological and of our own doing rather than God's. What we are accustomed to leads us to choose Heaven or Hell.

In this spirit world the essential difference between Heaven and Hell becomes clear. Those who prefer Hell have, in their worldly lives, spiraled in on themselves and lived primarily for themselves. Those destined for Heaven have in their worldly lives spiraled outward towards others and the common good. As goodness is inherent in the real nature of things, those who prefer Hell live in ignorance of, and conspire against, the world order, whereas those who are bent on Heaven delight in learning the nature of reality and cooperating with it. This disposition surfaces automatically as the sum of their life choices before death and the same holds for those who prefer Hell. Living for oneself is by its very nature a life of conflict, whereas loving cooperation brings peace and happiness. Hell is a place of constriction and limitation, for when one spirals inward, one enters the small limited world of self. Heaven is an opening-out world where you work cooperatively with others in harmony with the overall nature of

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things. Those in Hell can visit Heaven, but they are uncomfortable with the light of understanding there and return to what they are accustomed to.

Obviously the temporary stop in the World of Spirits is highly psychological because it involves discovering what we really are. We have all seen people who think of themselves first and foremost. This is the mark of Hell. And we have also seen people who consider and enjoy



others—the mark of Heaven. Actually this mark of Heaven is built into our humanity, for (Swedenborg was instructed) we are each born with an innate love of at least our own life. If we capitalize on this love and give it expression we come into the sphere of what we enjoy doing above all else. This is where all our capacities are best realized, and people differ as to where that happens to be—some in gardening, some in painting, wherever. In Heaven people gather in societies of people who enjoy doing the same kinds of things. There is work to be done in Heaven and these harmonious societies carry out spiritual functions that go far beyond the limited kinds of work we see in this world.

People who live out the love of their lives are happy and useful. “Uses” figure importantly in Heaven. When we are useful we contribute to the whole. We are also doing what we want to do. So Heaven can be said to be a kingdom of uses. Heaven appears to God as a “Grand Human” whose organs (the societies in Heaven) work together to make One Life. In the same vein, God sees the multiple churches and religions as coordinated in one Universal Church. Swedenborg was very much ahead of his time in this teaching.

All who enter Heaven are angels who are people of advanced spiritual understanding. There are three levels of this understanding measured by ascending degrees of love. The lowest, natural spiritual level is in harmony with the total order of things. Above it are angels who focus on love of neighbors but approach spiritual matters rationally. The highest kind of angel has love of the Lord as the main focus of its life. These angels not only know but also *feel* what is true and act on it without debate or speculation. These three angelic levels are

like steps into the love of God who is love itself.

Once we grasp the parameters of Heaven and Hell we see that they are anticipated in our earthly lives. Persons destined for Hell are already wrapped up in themselves and the inner quality of their lives is hellish. Conversely those who are destined for Heaven already enjoy a wider sphere of family and friends.

Swedenborg’s 27 years exploring Heaven greatly enriched his understanding of the human as well as the divine. Basically it led him to see how tightly the human meshes with the total order of things. God works through people who cooperate with him, and this indwelling God, who is a part of their very nature, is the ground of their immortality.

Let me end this section on Swedenborg by stating a little more fully than I have thus far the underlying thesis of this lecture. I call its three case studies *intimations* of immortality to steer clear of any claims of proof. Speaking for myself and minimally, I consider them as giving us things to think about when we ask whether there is life after death. I will, however, add a methodological conviction of mine. Images that derive from sense reports of our three-dimensional macro-world map attach no more isomorphically onto the world of spirit than they do onto the micro-world of quantum mechanics or the mega-world of relativity theory. I take this to mean that we can take seriously the abstract outlines of what Swedenborg saw without assuming that the concrete images that filled in those outlines are literally true.

Now to near death experiences. The 1975 publication of Raymond Moody’s *Life after Life* introduced a new frontier into the study of parapsychology, and interest in near-death experiences (hereafter NDE) has mounted steadily in the quarter-century that has intervened. There are now a dozen or so books on the subject and an international association devoted to its study that publishes a journal, the *Journal of Near Death Experiences*. Instead of trying to summarize the hundreds of reports that have appeared in print I intend to let a single report, which I will quote at some length, stand for them all. Here again William James is my mentor, for as we all know, much of the power of his *Varieties of Religious Experience* derives from its concreteness—the way he lets other people make his points for him by telling us what they directly experienced. What follows, then, is a solicited letter from a professor of history who has granted me permission to include it in this lecture. It reads:

I have no doubt that there was more to my experience than I can remember, for the memory loss that resulted from my illness was severe. The memories that I do have, however, are vivid and unforgettable and they changed my life. The reality that I was in was more real, more intense, than anything in this current world of ours. It was hyper-reality.

I was in a place. Around me was

flatness and barrenness. To talk about a sequence to the experience is to distort it. There was no time there. I now know that time is a convenient fiction for this world, but it did not exist in that one. Everything seemed to be at one moment, even when “events” seemed to occur in a sequence. [Swedenborg also says you have to get beyond time and space to see Heaven.] What seemed to be the sky, the land, and everything was of a pale blue-gray color. It was like being on a raft in the middle of the ocean where sky and sea merge into one monochromatic world, but I felt as though I were standing on firm land. There was only the blue-gray vastness that seemed to stretch endlessly. Beside me was a Being, whom I never saw but whose presence I felt constantly. Its presence was constant, enormous and powerful.

With the Being beside me, exuding love and comfort to me, I re-experienced my life, and it was not what I would have expected. While growing up in a fundamentalist church, I had been told many times about what it would be like when one faced God after death. It would be something like watching God’s movie of your life (as in Albert Brooks’s film *Defending Your Life*). You would watch all the scenes of your life on the screen and there would be nothing you could do but admit that the record was true: ‘Well, I guess you got me, fair and square.’ But this is not what happened. It *was* a re-experiencing of my life, but from three different perspectives simultaneously.

One perspective was my version of my life as I might have recounted it to anyone patient enough to listen. However, it was not so much the re-living of overt events as it was re-experiencing the *emotions, feelings, and thoughts* of my life. Here were the emotions that I had felt and why I had believed that I had them. Here were my conscious reasons for the actions that I had taken. Here were the hurts I felt and my responses to them. Here was my emotional life as I recalled having experienced it.

However, as I was re-experiencing *my* version of my life, I was also experiencing my life from the perspective of those with whom I was involved. I felt what they felt, I lived their emotions as they acted with and reacted to me. This was *their* version of my life. When I thought they were clearly out of line and reacted with anger or thoughtlessness, I felt the pain and frustration my actions caused *them*. It was an absolutely different view of my life and it was not a pretty one. It was shocking to feel the pain that another person felt due to what I had done even as, when I did them, I believed myself to have been fully justified because of the person’s own actions. At the time I had told myself that I was justified, but even if that were true, their pain was real. It hurt.

And there was more. At exactly the same time I experienced a *third* view of my life. It was not my version, with

my justifications. It was not that of the others in my life, with their versions of my life and their own justifications for their own actions, thoughts, and feelings. It was an unbiased view, free of the subjective and self-serving rationalizations that the others and I had used to support the countless acts of selfishness and lack of true love in our lives. To me it can only be described as God’s view of my life. It was what had *really* happened, the real motivations, the truth. Stripped away were my lies to myself that I actually believed, my self-justification, my preference to see myself always in the best light.

I did not find myself in Hell, but I was suffering torment. It was horribly painful to experience the fullness of my life and I was filled with contempt for myself. How could I have been so incredibly stupid as to believe my own lies? Why was simple compassion so difficult? In particular it hurt to discover that I had been hiding behind my version of logic in order to deny emotional truths.

All of this—the three-way re-experiencing of my life and self-judgment—was simultaneous and yet separate and distinct. There was no such thing as the sequence of events that we believe time to be.

In the end, I heard a judgment on my life, but it was my own judgment of myself. It came from within me and it had my voice. My life was clear to me. I was a failure.

And through all this the Being was at my side. I felt nothing but love and support from the Being. It exuded emotion: you are loved, you are lovable; your worst fault is that you are human. It goes with the territory. I remember the words, “Don’t worry, you are only human..”

I was in emotional agony. It was terrible to know that I was a mere mortal, just like everyone else, for I had thought that I was so much better than that. But the Being accepted me. The Being was letting me know that it was not acceptable to hurt other people, but it is part of the human condition. It’s not all right, because it hurts other people, but it is all right, because it is what humans do.

Next—if I can really talk about next, for time and sequence do not really exist—I felt that I was given an understanding of everything that is, at least everything that is really important. I felt as if all the secrets of the universe were revealed to me—not mathematical formulas, but simply how the universe operates, what is true, how things are. I now knew everything.

Here space requires that I break off Steven Fanning’s account (he has allowed me to mention his name) adding only its closing sentences, which read: “I remember making a positive decision. I wanted to come back to life. I wanted to do what I would be needed for. I then began my slow climb out of the coma and into consciousness.”

What are we to make of this account, which as I have said I am allowing to double for the whole of its genre? Without going back on my early admission that concerning immortality proofs are impossible, I find myself wanting to confess that to my ears Professor Fanning's account rings intuitively true to what we might *expect* to experience when we die if sentience does continue. It also registers an important corrective to the notion of a vengeful God that too often creeps into the popular imagination. Moral economy—justice—requires that there *be* judgment, a day of reckoning, but (as in most NDEs) Fanning experienced it as self-inflicted.

To this summary glance at the NDE phenomenon, I want to add only one more point and it takes the form of a question. Why are university professors, who set the pace for our culture, so closed to the *possibility* that such experiences might be veridical—which is to say, the foretastes of immortality that they present themselves as being? I lean here on an essay by a former MIT student of mine, Neal Grossman, who teaches philosophy at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Titling his paper “Who’s Afraid of Life After Death?” he answers: university professors are, out of all proportion to the general public. And the reason they are afraid of life after death is that they are (in the word he coins for the occasion) “fundamentalists.” To entertain the possibility that NDEs are what they purport to be would require entertaining the possibility that the materialistic worldview that dominates the academy today, together with its corollary that consciousness is an epiphenomenon, is false. So deeply ingrained is that worldview in the academic mind that the rejection of NDEs, Grossman concludes, has become a dogma or ideology rather than the hypothesis it must be if the subject is to be considered empirically, which is to say, scientifically. Presented with reports of NDEs, critics tend to dismiss them on grounds that no number of such cases could *prove* that there is life after death, which happens to be true but is no reason for disqualifying them from being evidence that bears on the issue, for scientific hypotheses are never proven. Theorems in logic and mathematics can be proved, but in empirical science, hypotheses are never proved. They are rendered more or less probable by the empirical findings that relate to them.

Moreover, some deliverances in NDEs, Grossman adds, can be empirically checked. There is a growing repository of cases in which subjects report information they could not possibly have acquired through their physical senses: information such as what was said in waiting rooms several floors below while their bodies were lying unconscious on the operating table. In one such case, the subject's body temperature had been lowered to 60 degrees and all the blood was drained from her body. Her electroencephalogram was silent, her brainstem response was absent, and no blood flowed through her brain. A brain in this state cannot create any kind of experience, yet the patient experienced a pro-

found NDE that included detailed veridical perceptions of what transpired in the operation.

From the drift of Grossman's paper we can imagine the kind of response he has gotten when he has tried to interest his colleagues in this kind of evidence. “Drug-induced hallucinations,” “last gasp of a dying brain,” “people see what they want to see”—these were the kinds of retorts he commonly heard. I say that this does not surprise us because I suspect that as card-carrying members to the academy, most of us, myself included, have to labor to keep similar retorts from bubbling up in our own minds.

With this I conclude the second section of my lecture, reminding you as I do so that my overarching objective is to present empirical evidence that might soften the current prejudices against immortality that Carol Zaleski last year targeted so tellingly from the theological side.

One evening last spring while I was dining in a New York City penthouse that overlooked the kingdoms of this world, my hostess turned to me and said, “Many years ago, while lying on a carpet and listening to Beethoven's Violin Concerto, I had a profound experience of the death of my ego and simultaneously of my identity with all that is. With that identity my fear of death dropped away.” She was describing her first encounter with an entheogen, one of that small class of non-addictive plants and chemicals that can alter consciousness dramatically. (Recreational users continue to call them psychedelics, but serious seekers feel that that word is too tied to the psychedelic 1960s to be serviceable.) Aldous Huxley anticipated my hostess's report. In a 1955 letter to Humphry Osmond, the Canadian chemist who introduced him to the entheogens, he wrote, “I remember saying and feeling that I don't think I should mind dying, for dying must be like this passage from the known (constituted by life-long habits of subject-object existence) to the unknown cosmic fact.”

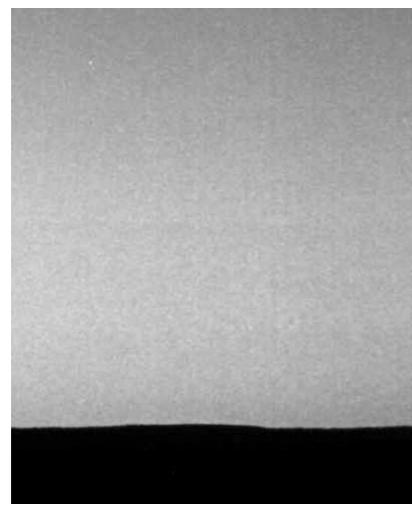
Behind these two firsthand testimonials lie entheogenic histories that stretch back into the twilight zones of protohistory. One of the hymns to Soma in the Rig Veda—Soma has been identified by Gordon Wasson as the psychoactive mushroom *Amanita muscaria*—reports,

*We have drunk Soma and become immortal;
We have attained the light the gods discovered.
What can hostility now do against us?
And what, immortal gods, the spite of mortals?*

And there is Eleusis. Grounded in the agricultural cycle and extended from there to human beings, its mystery of Demeter and Persephone is the story of life resurrecting from death. Initially that mystery was of local significance only, but it soon became an important part of Athenian citizenship, and eventually developed into a pan-Hellenic institution, attaining universal significance

by the time of the Roman Empire. The power of Eleusis derived not only from its message—that bodily death is not the end of the road—but in the fact that its initiates were *shown* that that is the case. It did this by transporting them to a place that outsiders would call mythical but that participants saw as the place where the final realities were directly perceived. What transported them to that place was an eight-day ritual that climaxed in the drinking of the *kykeon*, which contained an entheogen.

I say it was an entheogen as if this were established fact, which it is not, the thesis is controversial. But I put it forward as fact to challenge the classics establishment which has ignored the evidence rather than considering it seriously. That evidence derives from the triangulation of three disciplines—chemistry, mycology, and classics—as assembled most accessibly in a book, *The Road to Eleusis*, by authorities in all three fields: the mycologist Gordon Wasson; Albert Hofmann, the discoverer of LSD; and the classicist Carl Ruck, who teaches at Boston University. One would think that if classicists considered their thesis wrong they would take it as their professional responsibility to point that out. As



it is, the wide berth they have given the book suggests, on the one hand, psychological resistance to the idea that Eleusis was implicated with (to use the inflammatory word) a drug; and on the other hand, epistemic resistance, the refusal to accept exceptional states of consciousness as valid sources of knowledge.

I am reminded of the answer the late Indian philosopher T.M.P. Mahadevan gave me when I asked him for the basic difference between Indian philosophy and Western. He answered, “Western philosophy philosophizes from a single state of consciousness only, the waking state, whereas India philosophizes from all four states: waking, dream, dreamless sleep, and a fourth, *turiya*, that defies description.”

When other states of consciousness are taken into account, loss of the fear of death is reported so frequently that it would be difficult to choose from them so I shall quote what Stan Grof and Joan Halifax say in the most important compendium of such reports that has thus far been compiled, *The Human Encounter With Death*. The book is based on Grof's 20-year study of the results of psychedelic therapy, which involved hundreds of

patients and thousands of sessions, a study that began in Prague and ended 20 years later at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center. On page 20 of that book Grof writes: “Many individuals ... reported that their attitudes toward dying and their concepts of death underwent dramatic changes. Fear of their own physiological demise diminished, they became open to the possibility of consciousness existing after clinical death and tended to view the process of dying as an adventure in consciousness rather than the ultimate biological disaster.”

Again, as once before in this lecture, I will admit that the West is enough in my bones to make it seem passing strange that microscopic changes in brain chemistry can open us to the deepest truths of existence. But then the whole mind-brain interaction is passing strange, indeed, completely inexplicable. For, as Colin McGinn and others on the cutting edge of cognitive science now admit, in the more than 300 years since Descartes split the world into *res cogitans* and *res extensa* we have advanced not one iota in understanding the two-way interaction between mind and brain—how thoughts can engage (to put the matter crudely) a piece of meat, the brain, and vice versa. Neurotheologians are busy trying to see if our rapidly expanding knowledge of brain mechanisms can throw light on theological claims. They will discover that they cannot—neurotheology is no more than the latest form of reductionism. Its practitioners may be able to discover what brain processes are working when think theologically and experience mystically, thereby refining somewhat the discovery of some decades standing that the left brain undergirds our use of language. But some day they will wake up to the fact that this discovery tells us nothing about the truth status of what we say *with* language, or by extension, about the validity of what we experience when regions of the brain that are associated with various kinds of experience are active.

The events of contemporary history have so discredited the presuppositions of modern culture that epistemologically we must almost begin from scratch. Agnosticism has a place in this, for in many areas it is prudent simply to say we do not know. But Pascal is still with us. In the world of action, deeds, and choices, where we must decide, we cannot be loftily neutral. We have to stake out our life trajectories. That's why religion matters, and in an Ingersoll Lecture it is appropriate to add that religion invariably wagers on immortality. I have tried in this hour to suggest that there are empirical as well as theoretical reasons for thinking that the wager is not an irrational bet. ♦

I am indebted to Wilson Van Dusen for help with the Swedenborg section of this lecture, to Stephen Fanning and Neal Grossman for help with near-death experiences, and to Robert Forte and Robert Jesse for assisting me with entheogens. None of them should be held responsible for the use I have made of their help.
—Huston Smith