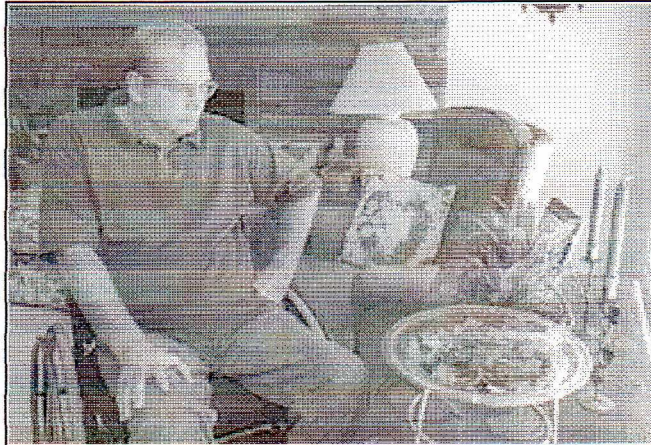


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Near Death Alters Life For Many Survivors

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For 25 years, Gilles Bedard had tried to re-create the music that overwhelmed him during his near-death experience, and finally, he thought he had recaptured some of the afterlife's orchestra.



William English says his near-death experience seven years ago created a hunger to love.
(Michael J. Miller/ The Salt Lake Tribune)

Now it was time to share it with a crowd of 200 attending the North American Conference of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS). The lights were extinguished. A white candle flickered on Bedard's podium.

Meditate, he said, fiddling with a tape machine's controls. Become one with the music, Bedard urged. Static, then the haunting theme to television's sci-fi series "The X Files" erupted from the speakers, followed by tittering from the darkness.

"The truth is out there!" a disembodied male voice declared from fifth row. The lights came back up.

"I think somebody is playing a trick on me," Bedard muttered, but finally found his own tape, and with the room once more bathed in an imitation of primordial nothingness came what he called "The Music in the Light."

Despite his presentation's comical beginnings, the New Age music producer from Montreal was deadly serious about his decades-long quest to share the tones of heaven with mortals.

Millions of Americans -- IANDS estimates between 8 million and 13 million -- claim to have had near-death experiences (NDEs), despite skeptics who insist the experiences are more likely medical than spiritual phenomena.

Bedard maintains that in November 1973, after being in and out of a coma for five months, he died, leaving his body and approaching a tunnel where 12 "lighted beings" told him to go back to Earth.

Before he re-entered his body, however, Bedard "heard music that filled me like a sound current. It was warm and at the same time very powerful.

Underlying the largely synthesized music is a foundational tone reminiscent of the low groaning chant of Tibetan Buddhist monks; the overall effect that of sleepy, deep breathing.

Throughout there are other faiths' sounds -- a vague auditory reference to Gregorian chants, a hint of an Indian sitar, a few minor notes of Middle Eastern flavor.

The universalist theme was repeated in addresses of other conference speakers such as George Ritchie Jr., who recounted his 1943 near-death journey into the presence of a being of light he calls "the Christ."

Ritchie says a doctor at an Army hospital in Abilene, Texas, had declared him dead and ordered his body taken to the morgue. However, an orderly -- convinced he had seen movement in the corpse -- convinced the doctor to inject adrenalin into Ritchie's heart.

He revived, but not before embarking on a cosmic odyssey of realms heavenly and hellish, Ritchie maintains.

Love, the Christ told him, was the key to a soul's progression after death, not the doctrines of the world's fractured faiths.

"You and I are never going to learn to love our neighbor until we learn to love -- and stop judging -- ourselves," said Ritchie, a physician and the author of several books about near-death experiences. "That was my Mount of Transfiguration. That was the beginning."

For Mally Cox-Chapman, a Yale-educated journalist and NDE researcher, her studies have convinced her of "the case for heaven" and that most near-death accounts are replete with symbols suggested by experiencers' cultural and religious backgrounds.

"They describe their experiences in the language they know best. Jews describe angels, Christians will describe Jesus coming to them," Cox-Chapman said. "It's very, very human for us to put things in our own relational context."

"My favorite one of these was a truck driver who said he 'went through this long tailpipe and there were these huge headlights at the other end,'" she said.

"There are, of course, skeptics," Cox-Chapman acknowledged. "They say NDE is nothing but blood loss, oxygen deprivation, nothing but endorphin surge or anesthesia, hallucinations."

"There are reasons to believe a lot of these are triggers for near-death experiences," she said. "But a trigger is not the experience."



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