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Out-of-body experiences

Part II

by Kristine Danowski

(This is a continuation of Part I, which appeared in the December 2008 issue.)

Like OBEs, NDEs have been described across cultures. Historically, Aristotle is the first known person to record an NDE, while both the Epic of Gilgamesh and the biblical old and new testaments have described them as well. These events are transitory and contain culturally-determined details. According to anthropologists, historical NDEs have three characteristics: a journey to the underworld, a journey to a higher world, and fantastic travel.

Returning to modern times, physician Kenneth Ring has been called the founder of the NDE movement. Ring defines the NDE “core experience” as having five essential elements: feelings of peace, the actual OBE, entering darkness, seeing the light, and entering the light. People have also frequently reported encountering previously deceased loved ones (including pets), encountering religious figures (Gilgamesh met Inanna, Christians meet Jesus, Muslims meet Mohammed, while atheists meet no one), life review, and experiencing a mystical consciousness.

Several physiological theories similar to those discussed previously for OBEs can explain NDEs. Temporal lobe paroxysm/limbic system syndrome, cerebral anoxia, massive cortical disinhibition, pharmaceuticals, the effects of the illness or trauma itself, and sensory deprivation have all been proposed as physiological causes for NDEs.

Similarly, psychological theories of NDEs have been proposed. The most developed of these theories is depersonalization. Depersonalization is the psychological threat of the dissolution of one’s personality at physical death. The first stage is resistance, in which the individual refuses to accept her/his own demise. Next comes a panoramic life review, in which the major events of one’s life, or one’s entire

EVENTS CALENDAR

January Elections

On Saturday, January 17, the North Texas Skeptics will hold its annual elections for the NTS Board of Directors. All dues paid up members of the NTS may vote. After the election of the Board, the members of the Board will then elect the officers of NTS. Remember, it is you, the members of the North Texas Skeptics, who will decide who runs the organization for the next year.

January 17, 2009, @ 2 pm
Center for Nonprofit
Management, 2900 Live Oak
Street, in Dallas

Let us know if you are coming.
These meeting dates are
sometimes changed.

214-335-9248

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The North Texas Skeptics is a tax-exempt 501 (c) (3) scientific and educational organization. All members receive the NTS newsletter and may attend NTS functions at which admission is charged at no or reduced cost. In addition, members will receive mailings on topics of current interest or social events.

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life, are relieved. Finally, the individual accepts her/his own death to achieve transcendence. Another psychological theory is called motivated fantasy, in which someone who expects to have an NDE actually has one because of the common knowledge of the core experience in popular culture. Another theory is archetypes, in which the individual accesses shared human racial memories, although how this happens is unknown.

As you must expect by now, several paranormal explanations for NDEs exist. All assume dualism and the existence of an afterlife. Soul travel and psychic vision are the most common. Proponents of the paranormal interpret NDEs as beyond usual scientific inquiry.

NDEs are studied by retrospective surveys of trauma survivors and the terminally ill. Again, these surveys are subjective, but short of actually attempting to induce an NDE not much else is possible. Unfortunately, investigator bias seems to be a problem in NDE research; paranormal proponents tend to interpret their data to support an afterlife and no other explanation. Both paranormalists and scientists tend to not report or under report negative results. Historical research is also valuable for cross-cultural study.

One physiological theory of NDEs employs trauma- or stress-induced endorphins as a cause. Similar to opiates, endorphins are the body's endogenous analgesics. Endorphins are known to alter sensory awareness and emotional responses. Producing the so-called "runner's high," they increase the body's pain threshold and produce feelings of tranquility. This NDE theory views NDEs as an evolutionary adaptation to protect us from the emotional and physical dangers of terror. Release of endorphins prevents panicky actions in response to life-threatening situations. Some survivors of serious accidents, especially survivors of high falls (like climbers and skydivers), report that they were not afraid of dying and felt no physical pain during and shortly after the accident. Those possessing this endorphin/NDE adaptation pass it to their offspring. However, the endorphin response is not foolproof and does not occur in everyone.

Within the past year, scientists proposed a new explanation of OBEs. Two studies in the journal *Science* investigated induced OBEs in the lab. In the first study from Sweden, experimenters performed two procedures on volunteers. First, experimenters tried to alter experimental subjects' perception of their spatial location. The subjects sat in chairs while the experimenters filmed their backs with a pair of video cameras. Then experimenters gave the subjects goggles with a stereoscopic view of their backs that captured the video. While the subjects wore the goggles, experimenters touched the subjects' chests with one rod and simultaneously aimed another rod at their "virtual chest" of the image projected into the goggles. Subjects reported feeling as though they occupied a space six-and-a-half feet behind their true location. In the second procedure, experimenters tested subjects to see if the volunteers would respond as if they were located in that false position. Experimenters equipped the volunteers with sensors that monitored electrical conductivity, then repeated the first video procedure. When they aimed a hammer at the illusory center of the subjects' false bodies, the subjects showed a spike in conductivity that corresponded to

increased sweating, emotional provocation, and anxiety. In Switzerland, other experimenters conducted similar trials with volunteers wearing video goggles. They projected an image of a mannequin onto the subjects' goggles. The subjects reported that they felt the mannequin was their true body. Taken together, these studies showed how the brain combined input from the eyes and skin to determine where the body was spatially located. The brain could be tricked into incorrectly positioning the body. Thus erroneous sensory information can cause an OBE.

OBEs and NDEs appear to be real phenomena. The issue is one of interpretation: are they physiological, psychological, sensory, or all of these? OBEs can be caused by neuro- or psychological disorders. Drugs, electrical stimulation, hypoxia, and mistaken sensory input and other states can induce them. No evidence exists that a soul or astral body either exists or causes OBEs or NDEs, and research thus far indicates no evidence of an afterlife.

Kristine Danowski is Vice President of the North Texas Skeptics



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Web News

by John Blanton

The World Wide Web is a wonderful source of information and news. Some of it is true, and some of it is not.

No apologies this time. 2009 is the 200th birthday of Charles Darwin. This year Web News will be devoted to stories about those fun-loving creationists and their wild fantasies.

Evolution education update: December 26, 2008

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2008-12-26.htm#update>

The National Center for Science Education (NCSE) is the premier organization for the promotion of teaching evolution in public schools (and keeping creationism out). The following is a weekly newsletter edited by Glenn Branch. Read, enjoy, join the NCSE.

“Strengths and weaknesses” is absent from the third, and final, draft of Texas’s science standards, and the two antievolution bills in Michigan have finally died.

“STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES” NIXED IN TEXAS

The third draft of Texas’s science standards is available — and the creationist catchphrase “strengths and weaknesses” is

absent. The current standards for high school biology include a requirement that reads, “The student is expected to analyze, review, and critique scientific explanations, including hypotheses and theories, as to their strengths and weaknesses using scientific evidence and information.” In 2003, the “strengths and weaknesses” language was selectively applied by members of the board attempting to dilute the treatment of evolution in the biology textbooks then under consideration, and so it was clear that the “strengths and weaknesses” language would be a matter of contention when the standards were next revised.

The first draft of the revised standards replaced the “strengths and weaknesses” language with “The student is expected to analyze and evaluate scientific explanations using empirical evidence, logical reasoning, and experimental and observational testing.” The change was hailed by the Texas Freedom Network, Texas Citizens for Science, and the 21st Century Science Coalition, as well as by the editorial boards of the Austin American-Statesman (October 6, 2008), and the Corpus Christi Call-Times (November 20, 2008). Additionally, a survey conducted by Raymond Eve and the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund demonstrated that the vast majority of biologists at universities in Texas rejected the idea of teaching the supposed weaknesses of evolution.

Nevertheless, when the Texas board of education began to hear testimony about the new standards on November 19, 2008, it was presented not with the first draft but with a second draft, in which the “strengths and weaknesses” language was replaced with a variant: “The student is expected to analyze and evaluate strengths and limitations of scientific explanations including those based on accepted scientific data, and evidence from students’ observations, experiments, models, and logical statements.” At the meeting, defenders of the integrity of science education argued that “strengths and limitations” was no improvement over “strengths and weaknesses.” The third draft reverts to the first draft’s “analyze and evaluate” language.

In its discussion of the nature of science, the third draft is similar but not identical to the first draft. According to the first draft, “Science uses observational evidence to make predictions of natural phenomena and to construct testable explanations. If ideas are based upon purported forces outside of nature, they cannot be tested using scientific methods.” The third draft reads, “Science, as defined by the National Academy of Sciences, is the ‘use of evidence to construct testable explanations and predictions of natural phenomena, as well as the knowledge generated through this process.’ ... Students should know that some questions are outside the realm of science because they deal with phenomena that are not scientifically testable.”

According to the Texas Education Agency’s website, the third draft will be considered by the state board of education at

its January 21-23, 2009, meeting, with a public hearing regarding the proposed revisions scheduled for January 21, 2009. The January meeting will presumably constitute the first reading of the new standards, with a period for further public comment following; the second reading and final vote are expected, but not guaranteed, to occur at the board’s March 26-27, 2009, meeting. The stakes are high: the standards will determine what is taught in Texas’s public school science classrooms and the content of the biology textbooks approved for use in the state for the next ten years.

In the meantime, evidence continues to accumulate that calling for teaching the “strengths and weaknesses” of evolution in Texas is, in practice, simply a form of stealth creationism. For example, in a post on the website of the San Antonio Express-News (December 12, 2008), a representative of the San Antonio Bible Based Sciences Association offered to provide “scientific evidence of weaknesses in evolution and for creation,” including “the fact that evolution violates the 1st and 2nd Laws of Thermodynamics, as well as the Law of Biogenesis,” as well as “creation evidence in the fields of microbiology, genetics, probability, biochemistry, biology, geology and physics which support creation and undermine evolution.”

And in a December 1, 2008, post on its blog, the Texas Freedom Network examined how members of the antievolution faction on the state board of education have responded to a Texas religious right organization’s questionnaire over the past few election cycles. According to TFN, in 2008, they strongly favored "forcing publishers to include strengths and weaknesses of the theory of evolution" in biology textbooks, while in 2006, they “strongly favored” the teaching of intelligent design" as a viable" theory in public school science classrooms, and in 2002, they “strongly favored” the same — even though the question was prominently, and not inaccurately, labeled “Creationism” then. “Who,” TFN asked, “do they think they’re fooling?”

For the current Texas state science standards (PDF), visit:
<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter112/ch112c.pdf>

For the first, second, and third drafts of the revised standards (PDF), visit:

http://www.tea.state.tx.us/teks/Sci_TEKS_9_12_091608.pdf
http://www.tea.state.tx.us/teks/science/Draft2SciTEKS9_12_1108.pdf
http://www.tea.state.tx.us/teks/Sci_TEKS_9-12_Clean_010509.pdf

For the websites of the pro-science organizations in Texas, visit:

<http://www.tfn.org/>
<http://www.texscience.org/>
<http://www.texasscientists.org/>

For the editorials in the *American-Statesman* and the *Call-Times*, visit:

http://www.statesman.com/opinion/content/editorial/stories/10/06/1006science_edit.html

<http://www.caller.com/news/2008/nov/20/texas-heads-for-another-squabble-over-evolution/>

For a report on the survey conducted by Eve and the TFN Education Fund (PDF), visit:

<http://www.tfn.org/site/DocServer/FinalWebPost.pdf?docID=861>

For the TEA's information on the standards revision procedure, visit:

<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/teks/scienceTEKS.html>

For the post on the *San Antonio Express-News's* website, visit:

<http://www.mysanantonio.com/opinion/commentary/36076039.html>

For the post on TFN's blog, visit:

<http://tfnblog.wordpress.com/2008/12/01/creationists-with-a-political-thesaurus/>

And for NCSE's previous coverage of events in Texas, visit:

<http://www.ncseweb.org/news/texas>

ANTIEVOLUTION BILLS DEAD IN MICHIGAN

When the Michigan legislature ended its last voting session for 2007-2008 on December 19, 2008, two antievolution bills — House Bill 6027 and Senate Bill 1361 — died in committee. The identical bills were instances of the “academic freedom” strategy for undermining the teaching of evolution; as NCSE’s Glenn Branch and Eugenie C. Scott recently wrote in their article “The Latest Face of Creationism,” published in the January 2009 issue of *Scientific American*, “ ‘Academic freedom’ was the creationist catchphrase of choice in 2008: the Louisiana Science Education Act was in fact born as the Louisiana Academic Freedom Act, and bills invoking the idea were introduced in Alabama, Florida, Michigan, Missouri and South Carolina, although, as of November, all were dead or stalled. ... The appeal of academic freedom as a slogan for the creationist fallback strategy is obvious: everybody approves of freedom, and plenty of people have a sense that academic freedom is desirable, even if they do not necessarily have a good understanding of what it is.”

The Michigan bills contended that “the teaching of some scientific subjects, such as biological evolution, the chemical origins of life, human impact of climate change, and human cloning, can cause controversy and that some teachers may be

unsure of the expectations concerning how they should present information on such subjects.” If enacted, the bills would have required state and local administrators “to create an environment within public elementary and secondary schools that encourages pupils to explore scientific questions, learn about scientific evidence, develop critical thinking skills, and respond appropriately and respectfully to differences of opinion about controversial issues” and “to assist teachers to find more effective ways to present the science curriculum in instances where that curriculum addresses scientific controversies” by allowing them “to help pupils understand, analyze, critique, and review in an objective manner the scientific strengths and scientific weaknesses of existing scientific theories pertinent to the course being taught.”

In a press release dated May 20, 2008, Michigan Citizens for Science blasted HB 6027, writing that “it does a disservice to teachers, school administrators and local school boards by urging them to incorporate material into science classes that is at odds with well-established science ... HB 6027 ushers schools down a path that will inevitably lead to expensive and divisive court battles.” Similarly, in July 2008, the Michigan Science Teachers Association decried both bills, arguing (document) that the stated goals of the bills are already addressed by the state’s educational system. The MSTA added, “Whereas evolution, climate change and cloning are the only ‘controversial topics’ cited in these bills while ‘controversial topics’ in non-scientific fields are noticeably omitted and whereas the Curriculum Expectations already address the pedagogical & educational goals of these bills, the legislative intent of these bills is called into question. ... This type of legislation may enable the introduction of non-scientific ideologies, such as ‘intelligent design (ID) creationism’, into the public science classroom.”

For information on both bills from the Michigan legislature, visit:

<http://legislature.mi.gov/doc.aspx?2008-HB-6027>

<http://legislature.mi.gov/doc.aspx?2008-SB-1361>

For Branch and Scott's article in *Scientific American*, visit:

<http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?id=the-latest-face-of-creationism>

For Michigan Citizens for Science's press release, visit:

<http://michigancitizensforscience.org/main/nfblog/2008/05/20/mcfs-press-release-on-hb-6027>

For the Michigan Science Teachers Association's statement (document), visit:

http://www.msta-mich.org/downloads/about/Academic_Freedom_Law.doc

And for NCSE's previous coverage of events in Michigan, visit:

<http://www.ncseweb.org/news/michigan>

Thanks for reading! And as always, be sure to consult NCSE's web site: <http://www.ncseweb.org> where you can always find the latest news on evolution education and threats to it.

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Not in Our Classrooms: Why Intelligent Design Is Wrong for Our Schools

<http://www.ncseweb.org/nioc>

Eugenie C. Scott's Evolution vs. Creationism

<http://www.ncseweb.org/evc>

NCSE's work is supported by its members. Join today!

<http://www.ncseweb.org/membership>

Future Meeting Dates

17 January 2009	11 July 2009
21 February 2009	8 August 2009
21 March 2009	12 September 2009
18 April 2009	10 October 2009
16 May 2009	14 November 2009
13 June 2009	12 December 2009

This has got to hurt

by John Blanton

In pro football it's called *piling on*. This is when the runner is down and defensive linemen keep plopping on top of the lifeless body. It gives you an idea of how the creationists must feel.

The year 2009 is the 200th birthday of Charles Darwin, and the January issue of *Scientific American* is devoted to the works of Charles Darwin, the theories of evolution, and the creationists who whine about it all.

Despite their incessant, hollow boasts, creationism—Intelligent Design by another name—is not gaining popularity in the scientific community. If anything, the recent public posturings of the creationists are earning the scorn of real scientists who would otherwise be content ignore the noise and keep to the practice of science. In a never-ending parade, reputable scientific organizations in the United States and the rest of the world are stepping forward and denouncing Intelligent Design as a sham. Failing to gain the endorsement of a single scientific body of worth, Intelligent Design is daily looking like an idea whose time has passed.

And that has got to hurt.

What's new

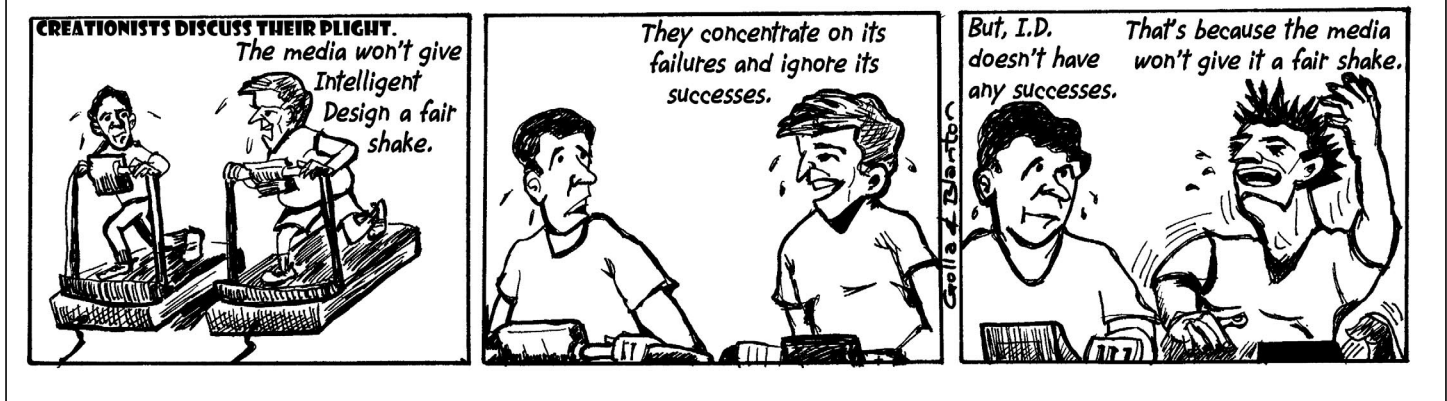
By Robert Park

[Robert Park publishes the What's New column at <http://www.bobpark.org/>. Following are some clippings of interest.]

ENERGY TRANSITION: OBAMA MAKES A PERFECT CALL.

[WN Dec 12] Steven Chu has been selected to be Secretary of Energy in the Obama Cabinet. Physicists in particular are elated; at last a genuine scientist will head the agency that funds the majority of physics research in the US. The position had usually been filled by political insiders. Chu shared the 1997 Nobel Prize with Bill Phillips for laser-cooling of atoms, and is

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currently the director of the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. Under Chu the lab is a center of research into biofuels and solar energy. He is a member of the Copenhagen Climate Council. Alas, there will be pressure worldwide to abandon carbon reduction to ameliorate the economic downturn.

ENERGY FROM WATER: IS CNN FLACKING FOR BLACKLIGHT?

[WN Dec 12] Yesterday, in the middle of the afternoon, I turned on CNN to see if there was any news. Two heads were talking about BlackLight Power, which had found “a way to extract all the energy we need from water.” There was a picture of Randy Mills in the background holding something technical. The “she” head said “it sounds like a great idea.” The “he” head agreed. (So do I, if you can make it work.) He said big companies have invested \$60 million, so it must work. I tried to find yesterday’s exchange on Google just now. No luck, but I found other CNN reports from last summer that sounded just like it. CNN should talk to Steven Chu; In 2000, Chu, along with other Nobel Prize winning physicists, was asked by a reporter about people investing in BlackLight. Chu’s response was not as colorful as some. “I feel sorry for them,” he said softly.

PCAST: OBAMA CONTINUES TO MAKE GOOD SCIENCE CHOICES.

[WN Dec 26] His choices have one thing in common: they are as different as they could be from those they will replace. Science is emerging, somewhat shaken, from the most secret presidency in our history. The success and credibility of science are anchored in the willingness of scientists to openly expose their ideas and results to challenge by other scientists. Just before Christmas, Obama tapped Harold Varmus and Eric

Lander to head the President’s Council of Science Advisors, a task they will share with John Holdren. According to the NY Times, Obama pledges to listen to their advice “especially when it is inconvenient. Varmus, who shared the 1989 Nobel Prize in Medicine with Michael Bishop for their discovery of the origin of retroviral oncogenes, resigned as head of NIH early in the Bush presidency to concentrate on the open-access system for scientific papers. He believes that scientists should have control over the dissemination of their research rather than journal editors. The culture of openness is perhaps the most important discovery of science. Governments should try it.

CLEAN COAL? FLOOD OF ASH-LADEN SLUDGE IS A WARNING.

[WN Dec 26] On Monday, near Harriman, Tennessee, a dike at a TVA generating plant on the banks of the Emory River burst, spreading vile sludge over hundreds of acres and destroying several homes. The immediate concern was the possible toxicity of the fly-ash sludge, which typically contains heavy metals such as arsenic and selenium that might contaminate water supplies. Based on preliminary tests, TVA officials said there is no danger to the millions of people who get their drinking water from the Tennessee River further downstream. Perhaps not, it is nevertheless an ugly offense to the senses. The problem is not really coal. The problem is that too many of us need too much power. We aren’t about to shiver in the dark. We can put off the inevitable by inventing more efficient light bulbs and building better insulated houses, but the population has already exceeded the sustainability limit.

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