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The Deep State of Self-Transformation

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SECTION HEAD: REFLECTIONS

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Research on near-death experience (NDE) shows that being physically near death, as in cardiac arrest, or drowning, is not essential to having the ND *experience*. Fear, depression, the anticipation of death might trigger some features of it. In a memorable dream about death, for example, I once experienced the “being of light.” Being in such deep states can induce mental changes in perception and in philosophical attitude.

Enlightenment experiences among yogis, shamans, and mystics all seem to follow a kind of near-death model. Forced or induced, they undergo a radical shift of attention away from what Bergson called the “the plane of life.” In one case of an extraordinary mystic, I took some pains to show that through fasting, solitude and spiritual practice, the life of Joseph of Copertino was an almost constant effort to produce the equivalent of the near-death state.ⁱ

The powerful effects are not based exclusively on being physically near death, say, by drowning or cardiac arrest. A spectrum of situations might set it off such as just getting sick, disrupting one’s relationship to the external world. Shamanic and other spiritual vocations often commence with getting sick, with examples that range from Francis of Assisi to Henri Matisse. In sickness, the latter discovered his vocation as an artist whereas Francis switched to become a troubadour of the divine life. The turn toward the deep self is often forced upon us under duress.

So in our darkest hours, the unexpected might surprise us. An example of unexpected transcendence is reported in a memoir by the Australian writer and painter, Linda Cull. The title of this well written account of a young woman’s spiritual transformation under extreme duress is *Where the Light Lives*. The story begins with the pains and humiliations of her early years, teased cruelly in school, bearing the impact of her Croatian father’s atrocious WW2 experiences and his debilitating illness—an illness that Linda inherited. In addition, at fourteen she was diagnosed with a spinal deformity that distressed her mentally and physically. Between the dark family aura and her own ill health, it’s no surprise that depression engulfed her.

In such straits, people cry out for help to god or spirit and in fact Linda calls prayer her “lifeline.” She describes how she wept and prayed and asked for divine assistance. As it turned out, her near-death of soul, matched by physical and emotional pain, was the prelude to reaping psychical and spiritual benefits. Cull provides an engaging account of her experiences, in detail, the personal and the transpersonal.ⁱⁱ

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