

Journey to the Edge: Faith and Near-Death Experiences

Part 4: Crossover Experiences

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Scripture: 1 Samuel 28:3-25 (The Message); John 8:31-32 (NRSV); Acts 16:7 (NRSV)

At 5:30 am on May 12, 2013, I awakened from a dream in which I had been hearing instrumental music that sounded vaguely familiar, like it was part of a piece I knew well but couldn't quite recall. The music was shifting back and forth, then started flowing down a crack of some kind. I was chasing after the music trying to hear more when I woke up.

Lying in bed, I continued trying to recall this dream music. However, I was having great difficulty remembering because another song started playing on an endless loop inside my head. It only grew stronger the more I tried pushing it away. I recognized this loop as a section of a very long song I hadn't heard in years called, "Cygnus X-1," by the rock group, Rush.

In eighth grade, when I first heard this 18-minute-long song, I was so taken by its lyrics that I transcribed them onto my classroom desk – from memory. A girl sitting next to me reported my transgression to our teacher. Much to this tattletale's chagrin, when the teacher came over and read the lyrics, she was so impressed that she promised me extra credit if I'd transcribe them to paper and turn them in to her before scrubbing my desk!

Lying in my bed thirty-six years later, struggling to remember even a single word of this song, my phone suddenly rang, startling me. "Who on earth would be calling so early in the morning?" It was my mother. Tearfully, she reported that my father had just died of a heart attack.

The next thing I knew, I was packing my bags to fly from Omaha, NE, to Scottsdale, AZ. "Cygnus X-1" continued playing on a seemingly endless loop in my head, leading me to spontaneously throw an old Rush concert t-shirt into my suitcase. After all, the band had inexplicably become part of my grief experience.

While waiting for my plane at Eppley Airfield, I decided to pull out my iPad and earbuds to finally solve the mystery of the lyrics. I found the song, moved my slider to roughly the area of the song that had been looping in my head, and hit "play".

I couldn't believe what I heard. It was that strange instrumental music that had been floating back and forth and disappearing down a crack in my dream before waking! I'd forgotten that this instrumental section immediately preceded the portion of "Cygnus X-1" that I'd been looking for. In other words, the song of my dream and the song that had been looping in my head ever since waking *were the same song!*

A bigger surprise awaited me. Once the band-and-forth instrumental portion diminished to nothing, the song continued with the exact section I was looking for. Imagine my utter shock when I heard these lyrics through my earbuds:

*I have memory and awareness
Though I have no shape or form
As a disembodied spirit
I am dead and yet unborn
I have passed into Olympus
As was told in tales of old
To the city of immortals
Marble white and purest gold.*

Had my father somehow passed into the next life, then crossed back over into this one to put a Rush song in my head moments after his death?

My father never listened to Rush. The chances of him inserting a Rush song in my head seemed infinitesimally small. Yet, the chances of this particular piece of music just randomly playing in my head at the time of my father's death seemed just as unlikely.

If my dad was seeking to get my attention that morning, it worked! I began to wonder about all the other stories I'd heard over the years of parents and other loved ones reaching out. When I sat down with parishioners to plan funerals and memorial services for loved ones, I heard such stories regularly. Grandma's presence had been felt in a room. A butterfly-loving spouse had reassured her husband of her presence when a butterfly inexplicably landed on his hand and remained there for several minutes. For the first 20 years of my ministry, I readily acknowledged how meaningful these experiences must have been to those who had them, but inside my head I was thinking, "This is just pious, wishful-thinking added to a mere coincidence." Had I been wrong to discount them this way for all these years?

According to centuries-old Jewish mysticism and certain rabbinic literature, it is believed that the soul remains close to the body for a period of time immediately after death. This is reflected in the intense mourning practices observed by Jews during what they call, "sitting Shiva," which lasts for seven days.

The first thirty days after death, known as "shloshim," is another significant period of mourning. During this time, the soul is believed to be adjusting to its new state. Mourners observe various customs to honor the deceased and support the soul's transition.

The Jewish practice of reciting the Mourner's Kaddish prayer for eleven months (just shy of a full year) is tied to the belief that the soul undergoes a period of reflection about the soul's life on earth for up to a year. This time serves as a form of assessment and purification. Loved ones who remain behind recite the Mourner's Kaddish to aid the soul in this purification process. Mourners refrain from praying in the twelfth month, however, out of respect for their loved one. "Surely, father/mother/sister/brother/etc., didn't need a full year of purification. Surely, they've passed on by now ..."

These Jewish practices seem to parallel what we've been learning about the afterlife through Near-Death Experiences. You may recall that NDE accounts often include the deceased remaining in this world for a period of time, initially floating near their body, observing what's going on. Another common feature is the Life Review, in which a person reviews their entire life, often from multiple perspectives. People frequently insist that they felt no judgment or condemnation by God during their life review, but that it did help them dispassionately assess what they did well and what they could have done better.

Could it be that ancient Jewish practices honoring and aiding those who have passed on are more reality-based than many think?

Long-held beliefs and practices don't exist in a vacuum. The fact that Jewish belief and practice concerning the lingering presence of loved ones originated centuries ago and have persisted through all these years suggests that a whole lot of people have felt that they have experienced the ongoing presence of a loved one firsthand. Of course, far more than Jews feel they have had firsthand encounters with the deceased.

When we take a closer look at our own scriptures, we find plenty of stories that suggest that the barrier between this life and the next is more porous than many believe. Take the curious story of Saul encountering the prophet Samuel through the aid of a medium from our reading, for instance. Of course, our own Christian faith rests on the foundation that Jesus interacted with his followers shortly after his earthly death, on Easter Sunday. Yet, are you aware that Jesus is said to have continued interacting spiritually with people long after Easter?

According to the Book of Acts, "After his suffering, Jesus presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them *over the course of forty days* and speaking about the kingdom of God." (Acts 1:3)

Then there's the story of Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit is said to have descended upon far more than Jesus's disciples in Jerusalem. Further into Acts, Luke tells us that that Paul and his companions "went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been *forbidden by the Holy Spirit* to speak the word in Asia." (Acts 16:6)

Who is this "Holy Spirit" anyway, and how does He/She/It communicate marching orders?

You may think that the "Holy Spirit" is something other than the ongoing spiritual presence of Jesus. This is because you are an inheritor of the Nicene Creed, written three centuries after Jesus, which makes a distinction between Christ, as the second member of the Trinity, and the Holy Spirit, its third member. Yet, first-century Christians had no Nicene Creed. All they could go by was their direct experience of the Spirit, which they considered to be the ongoing spiritual presence of Jesus.

If you think I'm making this up, just read the very next line in Acts 16 – which was part of our Scripture reading this morning: "When [Paul and his companions] had come opposite of Mysia, they attempted to go into [the province of] Bithynia, but the **Spirit of Jesus** did not allow

them.” So they headed south to Troas, instead. Apparently, Jesus was pretty busy guiding Paul’s journey – as if Jesus were walking with them every step of the way!

My purpose this morning is not to dissect Trinitarian Theology and whether or not the Spirit of Jesus and the Holy Spirit are different or the same. The point I am trying to make is that those who pass on may still be capable of connecting with us in some way, whether they be Jesus or a friend or relative. The fact that Paul and his companions believed that they were being guided by Jesus suggests that this communication channel, if real, may be quite useful.

What do you think? Before moving on, I invite you to take a couple minutes to consider this question: Have you ever had an experience that may or may not have been conclusive, but at least suggested that someone, or something – the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, or the spirit of a loved one – was reaching out to you in some way?

II. The Guy in the Body Bag

In January of 2003, Vincent Tolman took a contaminated health supplement that left him dead on the bathroom floor inside a Salt Lake City Dairy Queen. By the time someone found him and the paramedics arrived, about 45 minutes had passed. The paramedics found his body cold, without pulse, and beginning the first phases of rigor mortis, so they zipped him into a body bag, hefted him into their ambulance, and took off. A rookie paramedic sat in the back with Vincent’s body, feeling disappointed that they could do nothing to revive him. This was his first encounter with death. It wasn’t the experience he had hoped for!

Curiously, even though about 90 minutes had now passed since Vincent had died, the rookie up and decided to unzip the body bag, perform a tracheotomy on Vincent’s neck, and zap him with the defibrillator. As one would expect, there was no response of any kind. But, the rookie persisted, zapping him again. A single heartbeat appeared on the screen. Another zap, and Vincent’s heart started beating on its own!

What on earth could have moved this rookie paramedic to try to resuscitate a stone-cold corpse in a body bag like this?

I asked Vincent Tolman this very question! After reading his book, *The Light After Death*, I was so impressed by Vincent’s experience, and his account of the afterlife, that I reached out to him a few months ago and we had an enlightening 90-minute Zoom conversation.

According to Vincent, he was floating outside his body in perfect peace and tranquility watching the whole thing happen, almost as if he were watching a movie about someone else. Just before the rookie unzipped the body bag, Vincent says he saw something like a shooting star flash by his right side and hit the rookie in his heart area. His whole being lit up “like a supernova,” he says. Then he heard a voice from the light declare, “This one’s not dead.”

When the rookie made no move to respond, the voice resounded again, even louder, “This one’s not dead!” That’s when the rookie sprang into action.

I asked Vincent if he ever spoke to that rookie later about the experience. In fact, he had. The rookie's experience was much different from Vincent's. The rookie saw no light. He heard no voice. Rather, he simply felt a strange sense of curiosity. "I wonder what would happen if I tried the defibrillator on this guy?"

I tell you this story because some of you wonder why you have never been contacted by a loved one who has passed on, or the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, God, or any other spiritual presence.

I believe this story addresses your question with a question: How can you be so sure?

Perhaps the Spirit of Jesus, or the spirit of a loved one, has been firing spiritual Roman Candles, or shouting in your ear, for quite some time, trying to get your attention. All the rookie felt was a strange curiosity that moved him into action. What has been stirring your curiosity lately? Or what, in John Wesley's words, has been "strangely warming" your heart?

Perhaps Jesus knew what he was talking about when he said that the Kingdom of God is perceived by those with "eyes to see" and "ears to hear." And perhaps the greatest prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures knew what they were doing when they listened not for a great and booming voice of God to deliver God's messages, but for God's "still, small voice."

"God is still speaking!" So our denomination claims.

The question is, "Who is still listening?"