

self. It reveals that dying, remarkably, is a process of natural enlightenment, of finally coming home to our true self. It charts how we gradually open to deeper levels of our being, how we remerge with the Ground of Being from which we once emerged.

This book is based on observations and experiences gained after hundreds of hours at the bedsides of those who were dying. It is based on the words the dying people in those beds spoke to me. These observations and experiences and words reveal an apparently universal process of transformation inherent in death itself: the grace in dying.

This book does well with some time to contemplate its implications. The natural processes leading to dimensions of Spirit are our deathright. They are our birthright, as well. This book was written to be read as awareness grows of a coming end to our physical existence as well as in the midst of life.

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Living, Dying, and Transformation

The shortest, the swiftest, and the surest way to plumb Truth is through a mortal leap into the Unknown.

Henri Bergson

I am an ordinary person working with ordinary people dying ordinary deaths. The people I work with are neither saints nor sages. Although occasionally devout, they are not spiritual adepts. These are the people who have been in line with us at the supermarket or in the next lane at the traffic light; they are our parents, our friends, our spouses, our children, ourselves. The deaths I observed do not include the sudden, violent ones of attack or accident or the unexpected ones of a heart gone suddenly awry. They are the routinely prognosed deaths of terminal illness, the final fading away of a body riddled with cancer or stilled by a failing essential physiological system: ordinary people dying ordinary deaths.

What I have observed in these deaths, however, and what I have experienced is most certainly not ordinary; it is profound, transcendent, and extraordinary. By and large, people die in solemnity, peace, and transformed consciousness, radiating energy that can only be described as spiritual. Death, as no other moment we encounter in life, announces itself in resplendent silence. Death is so absolute that anyone's encounter with it is transforming. It provokes the strongest of feelings: terror, sadness,

rage, utter fascination, and an interior acknowledgment, an intuitive recognition, of liberation.

William James, the American giant of psychology and philosophy, once observed:

The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main these experiences and those of the world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in.¹

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It is my observation, after having been with hundreds of people who are dying, that death is most definitely one of those points where "higher energies filter in," where, as Mircea Eliade describes it, there is "a rupture of planes."

Wisdom traditions have acknowledged this for millennia. In the West, a series of treatises in the Middle Ages referred to as the *Ars Moriendi*, the "Art of Dying," set forth a cartography, a map, of the psychospiritual transformations of the dying process in Christian religious terms. At that time in that culture, there was confidence in the prevailing worldview that death, like life, is a pilgrimage. Dying persons, at the edge between life and death, were seen as beings glimpsing the mystery in a way that is rarely possible for those of us in the midst of life; they were seen as beings moving more rapidly in their pilgrimage into spiritual dimensions.

In the East, Padmasambhava gave a precise map and explanation of the dying process in the *Bardo Thodol*, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, in the eighth century. The essence of its teaching is that, in the dissolution of dying, we move beyond the personal sense of self and the delusions of ordinary mind. In the gap created by that movement, the nature of Reality is revealed, experienced, and entered into. Buddhist psychology sees dying as the moment when the fundamental nature of mind, the essence of who we are, sometimes called the Ground Luminosity or Clear Light or Immutability Radiance, naturally reveals itself in its vast glory.²

These viewpoints contain great wisdom. Our culture—America, at the turn of the third millennium—has lost much of that

wisdom and we are only now in the process of regaining it. A profound shift is occurring in human consciousness regarding the perception of death and dying. This shift was ushered in by the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and others who first turned to dying as a legitimate, heretofore unexamined, area of research. The shift gained further impetus from the hospice movement, the AIDS epidemic, and the advancement of medical techniques that increase the probability of near-death experiences. The limited, yet significant, resurgence of spiritual practice in the West as well as a general and evolutionary maturing of human consciousness have also contributed to the emergence of the study of death and dying as a field of research and interest. Unequivocally, death is coming to be seen as our final stage of growth.

It is to this study of death and dying that the ensuing observations and thoughts are offered, in the hopes that with careful examination, some understanding of the transformational possibilities of the human psyche, and the privilege of some inspiration, we might begin to articulate our own wisdom about this dying experience through which we all must pass. It behooves us as contemporary Westerners, who often react to images and concepts from other cultures and other times either by recoiling from them or by sensationalizing them, to mature our own wisdom tradition. It is time for us to observe and to describe the psychospiritual transformations normal and inherent in the dying process in precise terms that we can embrace as our own.

In this discussion, I describe the experience of dying by exploring the transformations that many of us who work with the dying are beginning to see. These transformations appear to be inherent in the dying process itself.

It has been said that death is a mirror in which all of life is reflected.³ When we look into this "mirror" of death and dying, we get a clearer image of ourselves, a clearer image of the inherent possibilities of human consciousness. Increasing our insight into what is generally considered to be the unfathomable nature of death and dying—particularly knowledge that reveals dying's transformative and transcendent power—helps us to understand our fear of death and to decrease that fear. With this insight, we can recognize death as a part of life as beautifully conceived as

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every other part. We can come closer to accepting the fact that, of course, part of the experience of physical existence involves the organism's natural design for death. Why do we die? We begin to answer the question simply: because we are alive. In the words of the American sage Ram Dass, "Death is not an outrage."

A greater understanding of the process of dying, in both its physical and psychospiritual dimensions, also will enable us to better guide our loved ones and ourselves through this difficult and profound time. To observe and intimately participate as a dying person's consciousness becomes one with the Clear Light or the Ground of Being is an act of great value, inexpressible and unforgettable. It is to be pierced by a power beyond our separate sense of self in a moment that sources both compassion and wisdom.

As we deepen our understanding of the entire human journey, from conception through death, we deepen our capacity to live more fully and freely, awed by the fact that we *are* alive. We become different beings through the transformative power of our insight into the dying process. We become larger, more integrated, and somehow more real with this expansion of our horizons and remapping of our boundaries. We enter levels that allow our now deeper being to open to *what is*—giving and taking, in living and in dying, with fewer gimmicks and simpler truth, with less frivolity and more joy, with less suffering and more gratitude.

Let me begin by describing certain observations of the dying process that lead one to the realization, the deep conviction, that death is an occasion of profound spiritual significance.

~ The Nearing Death Experience ~

When I first began to work with the dying, I struggled for some time with fear. I felt a visceral shock in witnessing the ravages of disease. At some point of visual habituation, the fear subsided enough to allow me to participate in the awesome majesty of these ordinary deaths. Participation is a profound stance. It is not mere observation, looking from the outside in, imagining and interpreting. It is a "being-with," a knowing, an empathic experiencing from the inside out. It is a dialogue. Because participation

creates depth and connection, it fosters humility and acceptance and understanding.

Participation has allowed me to witness a singular and ephemeral moment in the human journey, one I have come to call "the Nearing Death Experience." *The Nearing Death Experience is an apparently universal process marked primarily by the dissolution of the body and the separate sense of self and the ascendancy of spirit.*

In Taoist tradition, there is a saying: "The Way that can be spoken about is not the Way." In that sense, then, Spirit, that unnamable and underlying source of all being, is defined in this discussion only suggestively, by pointing toward those qualities that characterize it: empty fullness, expansive spaciousness, unconditionality, radiance, peace, love, and a perceptible sense of the Holy. The Nearing Death Experience occurs anywhere from several weeks to several days, even hours or minutes, before death. This unique psychospiritual process appears to be a sequence of increasingly higher or deeper levels of consciousness, each more enveloping than the next, through which each of us passes as we complete our experience in the human body. The Nearing Death Experience is characterized by certain subtle signals or "qualities" that, when observed, begin to define its parameters, to indicate that the dying person has entered a significant and transforming field of experience.

We can perceive a *quality of relaxation*. There is a sense of the end of struggle, a letting go, what author Thomas Moore refers to as "the emptying of self into the fullness of life." It is almost as if an invisible border has been crossed, a movement from what psychologist Lawrence LeShan calls "the time of sickness" to "the time of dying." People have described this as a process as effortless as that of an ice cube melting into a glass of water, a change in state, a return to that which it already is.

There is a *quality of withdrawal*. The person, nearing death, simply withdraws from the world and its myriad distractions and from the worldly self and its previously held identifications. This withdrawal is evident in detachment from all but the most precious inner circle of the person's loved ones. There is a turning inward, a decathexis, a turning of all of one's psychic energies—previously invested in objects, events, ideas—back to the center of

one's being. Priorities are turned upside down, reversed 180 degrees. The movement is from the outside in and results in the creation of what T. S. Eliot calls "the still point of the turning world" and the cessation of what the Buddhists call "grasping, yearning, and attachment." From the outside, this state resembles depression, but it is not. Depression, a normal part of the psychological process of living with terminal illness, has already been experienced and usually moved through prior to the Nearing Death Experience. The state of withdrawal close to death has the distinct feeling of being positive, purposeful, and transforming.

There is a brightening, a *quality of radiance*, in the person who is beginning to die. This brightening is observable when one sits, attention focused, for many hours with someone who is actively dying. It is subtle, but it is perceptible. The skin becomes radiant, almost opalescent. The brightening can be perceived in the aura, in the relaxing of the facial muscles, and at times in the light streaming from the eyes. If, as physicists posit, we are made of the same universal energy as are the stars, perhaps we, too, die like supernovas—imploding and radiating before we leave this world of form. Some people close to death have described to me an inner illumination, an experience of being filled with light, and in that sharing have confirmed my subtle observations.

There is a *quality of interiority* in the Nearing Death Experience. More time seems to be spent in meaningful spaces accessed only in the person's own deep interior. One dying woman described her experience as one in which she felt herself clearing out of the way so God could fill her. The Taoist tradition speaks of becoming invisible, of being no one special, just the deeply interior space in which creation is unfolding. The medieval Christian monastic tradition refers to this centered interiority as a threshold, or "liminal," experience. This interiority appears to allow, facilitate, nurture the path into within and on to beyond.

The Nearing Death Experience is characterized by a quieting, a hushing, a *quality of silence*. Any communication that does occur is essential and deep. It is often symbolic or metaphoric, pointing toward the ineffable. The language employed is like the language of love, dear and whispered, or the language of poetry, unfolded phrases fanning out into vast meaning. Much commu-

nication is beyond words, certainly beyond our cortically-bound everyday language. As Nicholas Berdyaev, a European theologian, puts it: "On the threshold of the most profound and ultimate depths we are faced with the revelation that our experience is contained within the depths of Divine Life itself. But at this point silence reigns, for no human language or concept can express this experience."⁴

We begin to get the feeling of entering holy ground when we approach a person who is nearing death. Many of us who work with the dying get a sense of the sacred as the dying person's awareness moves closer and closer in to the great mystery at the edge of life and death. The *quality of the sacred* begins to emerge—to my way of thinking—precisely because the last bond the dying person has to bodily life is love. Because they are of the same essence, the quality of the sacred and the quality of love arise simultaneously. And the moment when they arise, the moment when the heart begins to fully open, is perceptible. It can be felt like a shift in the air or recognized by the initial awkwardness of those in the presence of the dying person's intensity before they too, quite often, begin to experience some of that intensity themselves.

The Nearing Death Experience is similar to its better-known counterpart, the near-death experience. The two processes have many correlates, although the experience of nearing death through terminal illness is slower and more protracted. I believe, from hundreds of pieces of anecdotal evidence, that in the dying process a person makes many partial, preparatory trips into dimensions of being beyond our normal consciousness, experience, and identity. The Nearing Death Experience finds a human being flickering back and forth between realms of existence or states of consciousness, almost like a diver practicing the approach to a dive: he or she jumps into the air, then returns to the familiarity of the board, jumps and returns, jumps and returns until he or she makes the final ascent to the dive. Like those who have had a near-death experience that has had a profoundly transforming effect on the rest of their lives,⁵ those in the dying process evidence the human capacity for radical transformation. There is a *quality of transcendence*, of the development of a consciousness beyond the identity of the personal self: a transpersonal consciousness.

The Nearing Death Experience often seems to confer a special kind of knowledge, a *quality of knowing*. The person in the dying process has already entered the transforming field of a much larger vision. One dying woman told me, "I feel I am becoming part of something vast." There is a recognition, almost universally expressed, of an inner momentum of deeper unfolding, a recognition of the need to experience death, so that the next experience might be begun. There is often a direct experience, an immediate knowing, that one is a passenger in the body and often knowledge of when the leave-taking will occur. There are indications that those in the Nearing Death Experience have knowledge of life beyond that bound to space, time, and a physical body. Later I will share some anecdotes suggesting that, in this process, consciousness has transformed beyond our normal waking state and that our identity has expanded far beyond the personal sense of separate self. Although we do not yet have scientific proof, I suspect that, within the Nearing Death Experience, there are measurable changes in brainwave activity, such as those observed in experienced meditators or in persons undergoing other altered states of consciousness.

Nearing death, the energy field, or biofield, around the human body begins to manifest a *quality of intensity*. The energy field itself can often be perceived to "open," enlarge, and intensify. Energy can be felt rising through the *chakras* (a yogic term for the body's subtle energy centers) in preparation for the moment of exit. I have felt this many times. Often I have felt the "whoosh" of the exit itself. Another person present at a death felt herself to be "hanging out with the rushing explosion we once called Mrs. K."⁶

All of us have images that we perceive in our own mind's eye and, as Carl Jung first indicated with his recognition of archetypes, many of these images may be held, potentially, in common with all of humanity. Participating on a very close, intimate level with someone who has entered the Nearing Death Experience has occasionally allowed me to perceive the images they are perceiving. Although this would be difficult to "prove," I have noticed that these archetypal images tend to come into progressively clearer focus the closer one comes to death. As consciousness ex-

pands into ever more subtle dimensions in the Nearing Death Experience, several interesting things happen with people's images of the Divine, the Holy. Not only do people indicate that these images come into clearer focus, often people relate that they have the experience of melting into or becoming their own images of God. Nearing death, people begin to manifest the *quality of merging*. There is an end of separation, a cessation of duality. This suggests that in finally coming face-to-face with the Source of All Being, we recognize that we are looking in a mirror.

Many people going through the Nearing Death Experience have shared with me a sense that their experience is "right and fitting and just." There is a *quality of experienced perfection*, of complete appropriateness, of absolute safety. Many people close to death have said to me, "I'm surprised. It's really okay." Loved ones, on some level, recognize and acknowledge this perfection, finally allow themselves to say good-bye, and encourage the dying one to let go fully into that perfection. The ancient philosopher Plotinus expressed it thus: "I am making my last effort to return that which is divine in me to that which is divine in the universe."⁷ In our times, Lewis Thomas in *Lives of a Cell* declares: "I find myself surprised by the thought that dying is an all-right thing to do, but perhaps that should not surprise. It is, after all, the most ancient and fundamental of biologic functions with its mechanisms worked out with the same attention to detail, the same provision for the advantage of the organism, the same abundance of genetic information for guidance through the stages, that we have long since become accustomed to finding in all crucial acts of living."⁸

These qualities—the quality of relaxation, of withdrawal, of brightness or radiance, of interiority, of silence, of the sacred, of transcendence, of knowing, of intensity, of merging, and of experienced perfection—characterize the Nearing Death Experience. They are qualities not ordinarily known to or experienced by our separate sense of self. They are the qualities of grace. Each is a quality of expanded states of consciousness or identity. The very presence of these qualities suggests that Spirit is their source.

Speaking of higher states of meditation, the Zen master Hung Chih could just as easily have been describing the dying process:

Silently and serenely one forgets all words;
 Clearly and vividly *That* appears . . .
 When one realizes it, it is vast and without limit;
 In its Essence, it is pure awareness,
 Full of wonder in this pure reflection. . . .
 Infinite wonder permeates this serenity;
 In this illumination all intentional efforts vanish.
 Silence is the final word.
 Reflection is the response to all [manifestation].
 Devoid of any effort,
 This response is natural and spontaneous. . . .
 The Truth of silent illumination
 Is perfect and complete.?

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Stephen Levine, who also works with people who are dying, observed that his experiences allowed him "to understand why people who were dying and seemed to be having a difficult time often in the last moments went through a considerable change, a seeming opening beyond all the unfinished business and fear and holding that led up to that moment. For some this 'knowing' seemed to happen days or sometimes weeks in advance of death. For others it seemed to happen just moments before they left the body. . . . At some time, perhaps just a split second before life leaves the body, the perfection of that process is deeply understood. Indeed, this might be a universal experience; that even those who have held most tightly encounter the perfection and fearlessness of the moment of death."¹⁰

Like others who participate in this awesome process of dying, I see ordinary people like you and me die in peace and in serenity, without a struggle, dissolving out of their bodies. They die into their True and Essential nature. They appear, often knowingly, to melt into Spirit, as naturally as a snowflake melts on the hand. I believe that my observations, and those of others, are of a discernible Nearing Death Experience with discernible parameters that indicate transformation into expanded states of being, knowing, consciousness, and identity.

In this country, we are beginning to bring death more into the open. We are witness now to insightful observations arising from

our renewed willingness to participate in the dying process. More of us die at home, in our own and familiar environment, surrounded by family, and aware of the process that is occurring. Increasingly, those of us who are privileged to be an intimate part of someone's passage into death witness indications that, as we die, we merge into far greater Being.

In my earliest days working with the dying, a word began echoing in my mind. It repeated itself over and over as I rang the doorbell at a terminally ill person's home and was greeted by the stricken family; as I sat at the bedside of someone with labored breathing; as I drove down the road to the next person's bedside. Sometimes, standing at the door at the first moment of meeting, I felt great discomfort because I knew what lay ahead for the family—the relentless physical decline, the intensity of caregiving, the heartache—and they did not. The word that kept pounding through my thoughts was "tragedy." Tragedy, tragedy, tragedy. After work, driving through town, scrambling through the busy traffic to the supermarket, on my way to a movie or carting the kids around, I was aware that behind the closed doors of so many houses I passed, quiet to the bustling world outside, one thing only was happening—tragedy.

Gradually, however, as I allowed myself to enter more intimately into this process of dying, to participate more closely in this great mystery at the edge of life and death, I noticed myself feeling great warmth, even smiling to myself, as I passed houses in which someone I had come to know had died. Deep in the interior, behind those closed doors, often in the intimacy of a bedroom, I had been privileged to be part of moments of great depth: moments in which it felt like invisible veils were parted to reveal an illuminated reality. As I passed those houses, my memories began to pause gratefully over moments in which the quality of light, the quality of being, was other than what we normally experience in our hectic, workaday world.

Now, driving down a dirt road past a little trailer tucked under the live oaks, I remember how there, on that shady porch, an older man shared his profound transformation gained at great cost: the powerful, fearless, palpable depth of being in which he came to live shortly before he died. Or now, driving on what we call "the

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island," past palm-lined streets with tiled-roof houses, I can picture how in one of those houses, back through the family room and in the corner bedroom, a middle-aged woman shared the deeper wisdom and compassion that began to fill her as she, reluctantly, came close to the time when she would leave her family, as she turned to death. Driving through town began to change for me from an experience marked by the anguished remembrance of places where tragedy had occurred to an experience lined with landmarks of grace and warmth and Spirit.

I realized that what I had been witnessing in the process of dying was grace, all around, shimmering and penetrating. I began, with newly opened eyes, to observe the subtlety of this grace and to observe the qualities of grace in those nearing death. I became aware that all of the observed qualities of the Nearing Death Experience point to the fact that there is profound psychoalchemy occurring here, a passage to deeper being. As I worked with dying people from all walks of life and at many different levels of spiritual evolution, normative patterns of change, of transformations in consciousness, became apparent.

There appears to be a universal, sequential progression into deeper, subtler, and more enveloping dimensions of awareness, identity, and being as we begin to die—a movement from the periphery into the Center. Further, I realized that the transformation I was observing in people who were nearing death was the same psychoalchemy—in a greatly accelerated mode—that I had noticed in myself through two and a half decades of practicing contemplative disciplines and in the people with whom I had worked as a psychospiritual counselor.

I have come to believe that the time of dying effects a transformation from perceived tragedy to experienced grace. Beyond that, I think this transformation is a universal process. Although relatively unexamined, the Nearing Death Experience has profound implications. Dying offers the possibility of entering the radiance, the vastness, of our Essential Nature, at least for a few precious moments.

The qualities of grace that define the Nearing Death Experience announce that, *in and of itself*, the dying process provides the human being with the experience of transcendence—which is

the fundamental and purposeful dynamic of human life. Regardless of whether or not the person dying has ever had an experience of transcendence or a conscious longing for it, regardless of whether or not the person dying has pursued a spiritual practice, the opportunity of dying in and of itself seems to telescope the potentialities of a lifetime of *sadhana* (a Hindu term for the practice of a spiritual exercise or discipline). This is not to say that all will maintain that highest level of consciousness: Unity. It is to say that one appears to enter it or merge with it, at least for a precious moment, during the experience of death. The Nearing Death Experience implies a natural and conscious reemerging with the Ground of Being from which we have all once unconsciously emerged. A transformation occurs from the point of terror at the contemplation of the loss of our separate, personal self to a merging into the deep, nurturing, ineffable experience of Unity.

My experience is that most people who are dying have no conscious desire for transcendence; most of us do not live at the level of depth where such a longing is a conscious priority. And, yet, everyone does seem to enter a transcendent and transformed level of consciousness in the Nearing Death Experience. The AIDS community has called its disease "Accelerated Individual Discovery of Self" and has referred to the pandemic as "enlightenment at gunpoint." This phrase applies equally to any one of us who is dying. In Buddhist psychology, a *bodhimandala* is a space in which the experience of Unity Consciousness—God-realization, in Hindu terms—is actualized. The dying people with whom I have worked have indicated to me that the Nearing Death Experience is a *bodhimandala*. It is rather profound and encouraging to contemplate these indications that the life and death of a human being is so exquisitely calibrated as to automatically produce union with Spirit.

Specifically, this work proposes three central statements about the Nearing Death Experience and its significance in the human experience:

- ♦ First, the time of dying can most certainly be a time of transformation, a time of moving from a sense of perceived tragedy to a sense of experienced grace.

♦ Second, the Nearing Death Experience is posited as a moment of profound significance in the human journey. It appears to be spiritually transforming in and of itself. Precisely in its experienced transcendence, it can be seen as a "higher" or "deeper" stage of dying, to be added to those already explored by Kübler-Ross.¹¹ It is like no other phase in human life, except for the related near-death experience known to those who are brought back from the state of clinical death and the expansion of consciousness achieved by those who are consciously on a spiritual path. Nearing death, we can observe the acceleration of radical transformations leading the human being beyond the ego-bound self, an experience of separation, into Unity Consciousness.

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♦ And, third, it is proposed that we conceive of this end moment in the life of a human being as a "remerging," to reflect the fact that the soul is returning to merge into the Unity from which it had once emerged. The phases of the movement in this human journey always occur in the same sequential dynamic: from prepersonal levels of consciousness, through personal levels, and on into transpersonal consciousness that realizes its identity with the Ground of Being.

There will be theory spinning here—paradigm sifting, the tossing and turning of fact and speculation, information and idea—in the attempt to reveal new insight. What I am proposing for discussion consists largely, of course, of my subjective experience and my insights and conclusions drawn from that subjective experience. It is my conviction that others who would spend hundreds of hours in the presence of the dying—with a somewhat awakened consciousness and a willingness to participate with, to engage, to dialogue with the reality of the one dying—would arrive at similar conclusions. This work, therefore, offers my observations, some pieces of the wondrous puzzle of human consciousness, and a few basic orienting generalizations that may be helpful to our growing understanding of life and death.

To my knowledge, there are no objective, respectful tools

available to measure changes in levels of consciousness in the Nearing Death Experience. At this time, the experience remains beyond our ability to capture in quantitative terms. In some senses, it remains beyond our ability to capture verbally as well. Much of what occurs during the dying process is beyond words. This is literally true in the sense that the person nearing death is usually not speaking, at least not in everyday semantics. Words fail also in the sense that the one observing can only report perceived changes up to the point at which the consciousness of the dying person slips beyond our connection. The changes that can be perceived are subtle and deeply inner: intuitions, recognitions, experiences of realms of being and understanding, realms of depth and light and truth that words cannot grasp.

We can, however, provide a broader context for these observations and their implications. The theoretical context of transpersonal psychology¹² holds and illuminates these observed indications of the deep psychospiritual transformations of the Nearing Death Experience. The context of transpersonal psychology helps to clarify our understanding of the profound and radical growth apparently experienced in the dying process.

During the discussion, then, we can begin together by exploring the dynamics of transformation that consciousness—our sense of awareness or of self—experiences through the entire course of the human journey. We will also explore the course itself. The basic stance of this transformational view is simple. Out of the Ground of Being, we human beings emerge into the world of form in a state of relative undifferentiation and go on to achieve, through the course of childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, an experienced sense of differentiation—or, as Jung put it, individuation. Then, at least for a small percentage of enlightened human beings who herald the path of possibility for the rest of us, we consciously remerge, in the midst of life, into the Unity of ultimate reality. We return, in consciousness, to the Ground of Being.

My basic premise, encompassing all of these observations and self-reports, is that *if transformation into the final stage of consciousness, the merging of individual, personal identity into its Source, has not occurred prior to the time of dying, the Nearing Death Experience suggests*

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that dying, in and of itself, activates this potentiality.

From our vantage point at the end of the twentieth century in a culture that has considerable access to the wisdom of virtually every other culture, we are in the fortunate position of being at the very growing point of humanity's Tree of Knowledge. In strikingly similar views, the world's wisdom traditions outline the stages of each of our journeys, whether we walk the path in the midst of life or at the edge of life we call death. Realms beyond the one we assume as our ordinary waking consciousness exist and the path to those realms is known and can be shown. These realms are generally referred to as the transpersonal realms: levels of consciousness that go beyond the separate sense of self.

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Understanding the path to the transpersonal realms is the key to understanding the dying process. The path to the transpersonal realms, which the saints and sages of every age have known through the practice of meditation and prayer, appears to be the same transformative path each of us traverses in the process of dying. Furthermore, insight into this psychospiritual transformation leaves us with a recognition of purpose behind the momentum. In a hundred thousand voices it has been echoed: a human being is an organism designed to realize Spirit. "We are created for transcendence as birds are for flight and fish for swimming."¹³

Transpersonal insight describes the journey of human beings as one that leads, as the river to the ocean, directly back to their source in the Ground of Being. Transpersonal, transcendent realities are an intrinsic part of human consciousness. We have the opportunity, in the full actualization of human nature, to recognize, explore, and realize these dimensions. Behind all appearances, as Ken Wilber suggests, Spirit, our ever present source, appears in a spectrum from Spirit-as-matter to Spirit-as-life to Spirit-as-mind to Spirit-as-soul to Spirit-as-spirit. Matter to life to mind to soul to spirit: these are the landmarks on the way.

Transpersonal consciousness is a birthright of the human kingdom. The fact that so few people reach this expanded level of being does not negate the reality that it is the knowable and livable end stage, the *Omega*, of the human path. Most people just seem to get lost on the way. The act of dying, at least for a few precious moments, can bring us home.

The Journey to Ego

Life is this movement. . . .

J. Krishnamurti

The process of dying involves a head-on collision of awesome proportions. It is the collision of the literally irresistible force and the desperately immovable object. This is a collision that is seen coming, but is impossible to avoid. It is the head-on collision between the physical body in its dissolution and the human consciousness that is dwelling in that body.

Typically, that consciousness is the consciousness of the ego, the separate and personal sense of self. It is, for most of us, through the lens of personal consciousness that we read these words. It is, for most of us, in the context of personal consciousness that we experience our lives. We take our personal level of consciousness, the level of ego, to completely equate with consciousness itself. With very few exceptions at this stage of humanity's development, people confront death from the worldview of the mental ego. Figuratively, then, our intersection with the fact of terminal illness is from a perspective that is only halfway up the ladder of the vision and understanding that is possible for us as human beings.

Most of us don't realize that this level of ego, this separate-self consciousness, is but one of many levels of consciousness, some of which we have passed through before, some of which lie ahead of us. Each level or dimension has its own identity, its own modes of knowing and being and awareness.