

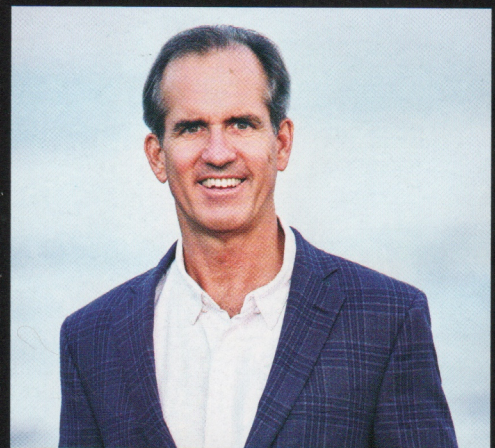
The Shared Crossing Project Makes Eternal Goodbye Obsolete

Story by Jeff Wing

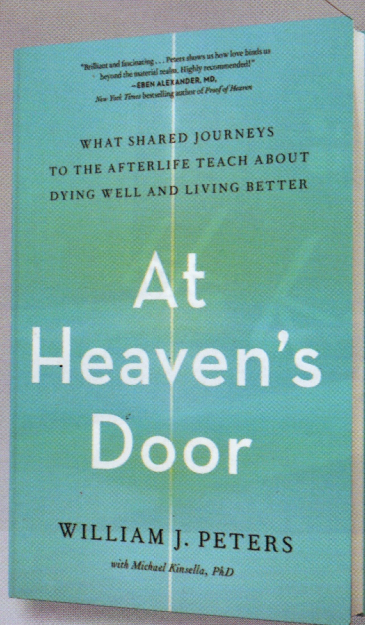
Call it a validation of Cartesian Dualism, call it a tidy demonstration of the First Law of Thermodynamics. Whatever you do, don't call it a Near-Death Experience. Angels, tunnels of light, the buoyancy of the startled flatliner as she delightfully sheds her body and heads for the ceiling – these conversation starters are not likely to earn one a second invite to the cocktail party. Earnest conversation about the afterlife is sometimes about as welcome as a wet sheepdog in Chez Panisse. Embarrassed throat-clearing has long been the soundtrack to William Peters' life pursuit. That may be changing.

"The Near-Death Experience is gaining traction in our culture," Peters says. "Not just anecdotally, but academically. There has been a plethora of scholarly articles written on the Near-Death Experience, and there is a growing sympathy with and sense of normalcy around the subject." Peters is a licensed psychotherapist and grief counselor – with degrees from Harvard and UC Berkeley – at the Family Therapy Institute of Santa Barbara (FTISB). He is also a longtime Near-Death Experience (NDE) researcher. In 2011, he founded, and today directs, the Shared Crossing Project – an organization dedicated to end-of-life studies. In 2013, Peters rolled out the Shared Crossing Research Initiative (SCRI), a not-for-profit investigative initiative in collaboration with the FTISB. Board-certified emergency physician Monica Williams, MD, is SCRI's medical director, and religious studies scholar Michael Kinsella, PhD, the institute's chief of research.

SCRI's deep dive is specifically focused on the phenomenon, quite similar to the NDE, known as the Shared Death Experience (SDE). The SDE has momentous implications for the way human beings regard death, themselves, and each other. "Displays of conscious, connected, and loving end-of-life experiences offer a life-changing perspective," Peters says. "Firsthand accounts of shared crossings can initiate significant personal transformations in the lives of those who hear them, which SCRI aims to



William Peters' groundbreaking new book explores death as a point on a continuum rather than "The End"



harness to effect positive transformations relating to end of life.” Peters is obliged to point out a crucial and undeniable distinction between the NDE and SDE. “Experiencing the life-changing awe and wonder of the NDE requires a brush with death,” he says. “By contrast, the SDE experiencer partakes of the wonder without the accompanying physical and emotional rigor of dying. The SDE can happen to anybody.”

Peters’ new book *At Heaven’s Door: What Shared Journeys to the Afterlife Teach About Dying Well and Living Better* – an immersive collection of first-person SDE accounts – is the culmination of his years spent researching and quantifying these phenomena the world over. The “Shared Death Experience” nomenclature suggests a carefully tailored ceremony of joined hands, meditative chanting, and candlelight. Au contraire. To say the least.

“Unsuspecting caregivers, loved ones, and even bystanders are broadsided by an experience they can’t explain in the moment,” Peters says of the SDE phenomenon, which, roughly speaking, involves someone being waylaid without warning and swept up into someone else’s technicolor demise. “Fifty-one percent of our SDE cases describe feeling – or seeing – the dying on a journey, transitioning from the human body to a glorious afterlife.”

If “glorious afterlife” gives you pause, you’re not alone – though you hold membership in a curiously conflicted club. Today, the Pew Research Center reports that 73 percent of surveyed American adults believe in some form of afterlife, and a 2013 report by the National Center for Biotechnology Information found that some nine million Americans claim to have had their *own* NDEs. Despite this statistically heartening endorsement of the hereafter, revived returnees who report on postmortem journeys to the light are not often given a sympathetic hearing.

It bears mentioning that the NDE is not like the UFO encounter in a remote forest clearing, or a glimpse of Scottish plesiosaur from the shores of Loch Ness. By its nature, the NDE often occurs in a hospital; by one definition a large box full of scientists. Often these specialists are clustered about the NDE experiencer amid stacked, beeping machinery that intently monitors the body’s every autonomic whimsy in real time. If the NDE is broadly (and

somewhat approximately) classified as one or another species of “spiritual episode,” it is a spiritual episode encrusted with data.

“We know these experiences happen,” Peters says. “You simply can’t discount the research.” One other thing: The Shared Death Experiencer is, effectively, a fully conscious participant in someone else’s end-of-life melee. One could call SDE the corroborative frosting on the NDE cake.

“The person who’s having the Shared Death Experience is healthy – sound in mind and body,” Peters says avidly. “Someone transitions, and they share that death experience with them. They could be miles away or right at the bedside.” He pauses then, seems to reconnoiter. His shoulders visibly relax. “Look,” he says in a mediating tone. “If these were just isolated experiences happening here and there outside the mainstream, we wouldn’t have to deal with this stuff.” His eyebrows rise in deadpan. “But this is death. Everyone we know—including ourselves—is going to die. So we best take these experiences on and learn from them. For those open to such learnings, end-of-life and grief and bereavement are much better, more meaningful experiences that positively draw from the whole picture.”



Epiphany at the Outlets

Allison Armour is an artist whose garden sculpture is pointedly not of the “gnome wearing cap” variety. Highly polished steel megaliths in chimeric negotiation with the surrounding landscape, bewilderingly lovely fountains, light-gathering glass spheres like enormous zero-gee droplets in a NASA documentary – Armour has, for about 22 years, staked out and conquered her own artisanal territory. It seems to be going okay. Clients include the King of Denmark and a guy named Ringo Starr. “I had Ringo in my garden for three hours. I couldn’t get rid of him,” she laughs. “It was amazing.” An American who lived in the United Kingdom for 26 years, her hint of an accent intrigues. “I still have a little studio in England,” she says. “I used to live in this tiny village in Sussex, and I had a very close friend named Wendy. She was also American, but probably 20 years older than me and had lived there longer than I had. We became very close friends.

“Well, I was here in town, in Camarillo, actually. I’ve got my

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– William Peters

shopping bags and I’m walking to my car and suddenly Wendy – comes to me! She said ‘Allison. I’m so sorry. *I’m so sorry.* I just couldn’t do it anymore. I was too tired.’” Armour pauses in the telling. “Then...I had a sudden image of Wendy being 16 and totally healthy and free and footloose, sort of skipping along in this country setting. She’d been in poor health for a very long time, very frail and thin, and she couldn’t fight death any longer. She didn’t want to!” You sensed her, the interviewer timidly offers. “I *saw* her,” Armour clarifies. “But I had no idea what was happening. Then the phone rang. It was a UK phone number, and I knew straight away.”

Wendy had departed. On her way to the ether she seemingly stopped off to let Allison know. It’s a strange, charmed fact that the SDE very often has a message-bearing component, the dead popping in to reassure the living. “Hey, I just died. But it’s all cool. *Calm down.*” The spirits who so terrify us in the movies in fact arrive bearing aspirin and a glass of water. Armour’s take on all this is not so much a dance to the music of the spheres, as a nod to the unexplained ephemera that animate daily existence, and which most of us blankly step over as one would a fault in the sidewalk.

“Whether they call it intuition or something else – it’s that moment you know absolutely that you’re going to run into so-and-so today.” Allison’s SDE with Wendy says much about the organic, almost chummy ordinariness of death in the life cycle – a grand leave-taking not heralded by trumpet-blowing cherubim and seraphim but by a muted apology in the parking lot. “It’s not like I was meditating,” Armour says. “I was at the bloody Factory Outlets. How crazy is that?”

Sharing is Believing

“SDE is a natural, physical process that we may be able to scientifically understand at some point,” Peters says. “But the therapeutic value of these experiences can’t be overstated.”

Peters and his team have established an actionable typology around the various modes and elements of the SDE experience, his new book the first effort to formally codify its characteristics. He has high hopes. “When it becomes widely understood and accepted that all this is happening, we can bring death and dying into the center of our families and communities. We can gather in honoring that death. We lose a loved one, and it’s painful. But there’s something glorious and awe-inspiring in these passages;

something that speaks to the essence of who we are as beings. Life survives death. Life is bigger than death.” The reported adventures of the temporarily dead are inevitably sidling into the realm of the peer reviewed.

“The veteran hospice workers know about these experiences,” Peters says. “We just published the first article on SDE in the *American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Medicine*. I was heartened by the overwhelming validation of our study by the three reviewers. One wrote, ‘Your work can increase the awareness of the SDE, and end-of-life phenomena in general, which is important to provide conditions for the development of support to the bereaved as well as patients. I enjoyed reading your well-written manuscript.’” Peters is emphatic. “This is a major step in normalizing the SDE and affirming the many transcendental experiences of caregivers as they lovingly aid and accompany the dying through this final chapter of human mortality.”

We’re meeting on a sun-splashed terrace at Peters’ home, serenaded by pleasantly cacophonous birdsong and overarched by an azure, cloud-dappled dome that reportedly kisses space and keeps on going. Dressed sensibly in a button-down shirt and given to easy laughter (some of it at his own expense), Peters is not a weird proselytizer of other realms nor a tie-dye-swaddled blabbermouth hung with crystals. Not that there’s anything wrong with that. “Life is a vitality that wants to connect with more vitality, right? And where does that vitality reside? It’s not in the human body when it’s dead. It’s somewhere else, but it’s still present.”

Right. The first law of thermodynamics; a staple of physics. Energy isn’t created or destroyed—there is a fixed amount of it in the universe and it just gets moved around, repurposed.

“Throughout human history, the great wisdom traditions and philosophical enquiries have worked at these major questions. Who am I? How did I get here? Do I exist beyond this human death? And if so, what’s the quality of my life?” Peters pauses. “I mean, is this a blip or is this the whole thing?”

What to Expect



Natalie Orfalea is not possessed of superpowers – she can’t fly or bend metal with her mind. Her power is in her perspective. Many of us hurriedly tune into *The Life Show* on an old TV with a bent antenna. Natalie sees this nutty pageant in wide screen Technicolor. The Natalie Orfalea Foundation’s mission statement – “We partner with innovative individuals and organizations...to serve the highest good of all life on this planet” – sums up the deep embrace that is her everyday vision.



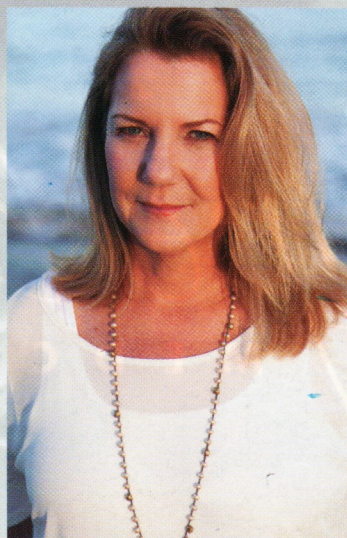
William Peters, Nancy Koppelman, and Rod Lathim

“My support of William’s work comes through my own experiences: the Near-Death and the Shared Death Experiences I was exposed to through the loss of my father and the loss of my son – both prior to and following their deaths.” Raised in a family of deep faith, Orfalea found her own way. “My belief system is not as dogmatic as the one I was raised in – but I still didn’t understand what these experiences meant. A friend of mine – Nancy Koppelman, who has since passed – suggested that I get acquainted with William’s work. I found the experience to be very illuminating and deeply satisfying.”

William Peters’ Shared Crossing Project looks at the phenomenological maelstrom surrounding death from a nonreligious, not to say irreligious, point of view. “As a young mom-to-be, I went to classes to learn about birth, *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*. We don’t do any of that around death,” Orfalea says. Western culture’s take on death may be best summarized by poet Dylan Thomas’ famous imprecation that we “Rage against the dying of the light.” Death is to be defied and avoided. Not just death itself – the very topic of death.

“The utterances of people that are dying could provide a gateway into the mysteries of this life,” Orfalea says. “Death is a sacred space. Just like birth is. We have bar mitzvahs and baptisms, celebratory rituals around birth. Somehow death gets put in a category of its own. It’s treated like a failure.” As counterpoint, Orfalea describes the scene around the “deathbed” of her dear friend (and beloved Montecitan) Nancy Koppelman – a mover, shaker, and controlled explosion of joy for whom daily life was rocket fuel. “I miss her so terribly,” Orfalea says. “She was just an exemplary person in the way she actually *lived* – and in how she left the world as well. It was beautiful to see how many people came to her during the time of her passing, out of love for what she had brought to *their* lives.” I’d heard awed descriptions of Nancy Koppelman’s last days in our earthly ’hood. Raging against a “dying of the light” didn’t seem to figure into it. She seemed fixated on a still brighter light. “William’s research shows us that those people who experience SDEs or NDEs describe an overwhelming sense of calmness and peace, along with the healing power of the Shared Crossing,” Orfalea says. “That’s the opportunity that we have in this work.”

An Exclamatory Sky



“I’m a fairly science-based person, just by the nature of who I am and the work that I do – making natural history films. I spend a lot of time questioning everything! That particular experience...it was so vivid and so real that I couldn’t explain it. I’d always wondered – like everybody, of course – what happens after we die.” Mimi Armstrong deGruy is a Santa Barbara-based documentary filmmaker whose celebrated work in partnership with

her husband, deep-water explorer and cinematographer Mike deGruy, stretched over two decades of exploration, yielding film and television projects for the BBC, *National Geographic*, and others. “There’s a lot we don’t understand. I’m curious and open to all of it.”

On February 4, 2012, Mike was off on a shoot in Australia and Mimi was on the 101, driving home from a film festival. “I remember exactly the spot on the freeway where it happened,” she says. “I was just very suddenly struck by this intense, intense anxiety. It was so bizarre. I thought, *What in the world is going on?* I wondered if I was having a heart attack. It felt like something was just jamming into my heart. I got home – I saw the lights and I saw my dogs, and I thought, you know, I’m fine. It was so weird. Maybe an hour later I got the phone call that Mike had died.”

Mike deGruy and Australian filmmaker Andrew Wight had both been killed when the light helicopter Wight was piloting nosed down and crashed on takeoff. They’d been on their way to film the launch of a submarine in nearby Jervis Bay as part of a James Cameron documentary. “In working with William and Shared Crossing later, I looked back on that experience and thought – yeah – I surely had some connection with Mike at the moment he died. Mike was a guy with tremendous life force. His death was so sudden, and so far away. It was very easy to have moments where I just thought he was still off on the shoot and would be coming back.”

The brute fact of personal cessation doesn’t always compute. “I’d certainly had a fair number of people in my family die,” Mimi says. “But I’d never before had this sense of *where did you go?* That really struck me when Mike died. He was just so alive. Someone like that doesn’t just go *poof* into nothing.”

It was recommended to deGruy that she go talk to someone at hospice. “I did that, and the person there suggested I meet with William. I thought it might be helpful to discuss these things in a therapeutic setting, yes. But I also had real curiosity around wanting to understand, at some level, where Mike had gone.” Mimi’s pain was mitigated by thoughts of Mike continuing. “It was comforting to imagine that he was still around in some form, on some spiritual



level; and I'm not downplaying the reality of what happened to me – what I felt in the car. I was drawn to the SDE narrative – whether because it was comforting or I really believed that he had gone to a better place, I wasn't really sure.”

Sure is the elusive golden ticket on such matters. Sometimes, though, an electric little leap of *que será, será* can overtop the high bar of scientific empiricism.

“One other thing,” Mimi says. “At Mike’s memorial, his brother referred to him as a human exclamation point. It was so true! We all chuckled at that. ‘Oh, yeah, that’s a very fitting way to describe Mike.’ About a half hour later we were down at the beach doing this beautiful rose petal ceremony. Someone said ‘look at that!’...and there was the most perfect exclamation point in the clouds. Where did it come from? That just threw everyone.”

Mimi at that moment wasn't quite ready to roll with this “exclamation point in the sky” business. She laughingly describes her rationalist pursuit of the truth.

“I spent the next couple of days trying to find out who organized the cloud formation. Eventually, my kids said ‘Mom!’ That was a turning point for my kids and me. This led to the Shared Crossing Project through my work with William, which was so very helpful to me with my dad when he died a few years ago.” She pauses. “The ultimate gift of Shared Crossings is just a closeness with those you love the most, so that in the process of living – and then also dying – you have conversations that you won't have to regret not having had. The value of what William is doing with the Shared Crossing Project is that you come to appreciate the plausibility that physical death isn't really goodbye.”

Where Am “I”?

In the 17th century, René Descartes (whose “I think, therefore I am” is considered the Age of Enlightenment’s inaugural bumper sticker)

articulated what came to be called Cartesian Dualism. We know it today as the Mind/Body Problem. The “problem” can be boiled down to the question one is advised not to holler in a crowded room: “Am I my brain?” Descartes posited that the “mind” is not produced by the chemistry and synaptic fireworks of the brain but is an immaterial and temporary tenant there.

NDE and SDE thus live at the busy intersection of Consciousness Studies and philosophical inquiry; making *At Heaven’s Door* one of the least likely beach reads since Gutenberg discovered moveable type. Enjoy it with a daiquiri. The book’s bestseller status and growing reputation as an addictive read has everything to do with its subtext: death isn’t a catastrophe, nor even a happy ending. It’s the unlikely start of another form of life. How might adopting that truth change the caste of our mortal days spent with one eye ever on the hourglass?

“What are these experiences? What’s the value here?” Given Peters’ years in the counseling trenches, from the AIDS epidemic in San Francisco to stints in war-torn Guatemala and Peru, his view of NDE and SDE phenomena as tools for fully living is understandable. “There is a profound therapeutic benefit to knowing that your loved one is alive and well and abiding in a place where you’ll see them again. Your grief is radically transformed.” When longtime friend and supporter Nancy Koppelman died, she startlingly appeared to both Peters and a member of his immediate family.

“It’s what I call a flyby,” Peters says. “A loved one can come in almost like Tinkerbell.” He smiles, a little tearily. “They drop in – *boom* – and they deliver a massive nonverbal heartfelt information set.” Peters summarizes the typical SDE message – a cosmic benediction more likely to be delivered in a parking lot than a stained-glass cathedral. “It’s me! Thank you for having shared my life. I love you. I’m heading out, and I’ll see you later.”