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Reflections from Three Decades with IANDS

Featuring **Nancy Evans Bush**

Interviewed by *Amy Stringer*

VS: What was there in the field of near-death studies before IANDS?

NEB: There was no field of near-death studies before 1975, when Raymond Moody gave NDEs a name. Even then, there was no actual field, only Moody and a bare handful of individuals doing their best to deal with thousands of people asking questions. I'd say the field itself began with IANDS in 1978.

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VS: How did IANDS evolve?

NEB: By 1978, there was such an explosion of questions about NDEs that it seemed like a good idea to get researchers and experiencers together with other interested people to share information. Moody invited all the researchers he knew to a weekend at his farm in Virginia—I think there were maybe a dozen people altogether, including physicians Bruce Greyson and Michael Sabom, psychologist Kenneth Ring, and social workers John Audette and Sarah Kreutziger—and out of that weekend came the Association for the Scientific Study of Near-Death Phenomena. In 1981 the organization moved to the University of Connecticut and was renamed the International Association for Near-Death Studies, IANDS.

--- **Nancy E. Bush** ---
Outgoing IANDS Vice-president.

The essential purpose of IANDS has been to provide companionship for the members and reliable information—research-grounded information wherever possible—to establish the credibility of near-death experience as a subject and build the professional integrity of IANDS as an organization. IANDS has carefully avoided taking any stand that would limit interpretation of NDEs to a single model, whether scientific or philosophical, religious or secular. This openness can be problematic, but it's also a great strength.

VS: When did you make your entrance?

NEB: A few months after IANDS was incorporated in 1981, the board began looking for an office manager. For some reason, I answered a tiny ad in the *Hartford Courant*. I had

never heard of a near-death experience, hadn't read the book, knew nothing about psychic anything. But I had management experience.

VS: Please tell us about your own NDE which you had during childbirth.

NEB: It was not a radiant experience; it was an utterly terrifying experience of the void. I had never heard of anything like it. I didn't know anybody else in the world had ever had such an experience. That left me with a sense that I was walking around with secret

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knowledge too terrible to tell anybody.

There was a group of circles. They were clicking, black to white, white to black. They weren't...I didn't think they were evil, but they were malicious, maybe the way a sibling would be malicious when you're being really heartless to each other. There was no question: they were authoritative. They knew stuff I did not know. I was the stranger there; they weren't. It never occurred to me that this was hell, and it never occurred to me that I was dead, only that this was what it would probably be like when I was dead. I just knew that this was a place other than where I thought I had been.

I was told I did not exist. I had never existed. It had been a joke. My life was a joke; my baby's life was a joke. I had a 17-month-old daughter; she did not exist. My mother did not exist. Hills, trees, robins, Earth did not exist. It was so utterly clear I was being told something true. It's hard to explain ...what would have been the point of arguing? What they were saying was incontrovertibly true.

[I had] no context for it. The Christianity I grew up with was a pretty amiable theology-- Congregational UCC, God is love, and Jesus loves the little children. My father and grandfather were ministers from a very liberal, intellectual tradition. Oh, some people talked about hell, but we knew that God loves his people, and if you try to do the right thing, you'll be all right.

When I woke up my first conscious thought was, "Calvin was right...predestination." There are sheep, and there are goats, and I must be a goat; some people are just automatically on the outs with God. And, the reason that occurred to me was because it was so contrary to anything I thought I deserved.

Most of the people who have written about unpleasant experiences talk about them as happening to people who were sin-ridden, guilt-ridden, hostile, God-denying, love denying, suicidal – all of that. None of which applied to me. I was far from perfect, but for heaven's sake, I had been saved twice at Billy Graham crusades! I had been born again.....and again! There was nothing in my background that could in any way help me explain this experience. I didn't even know where to look for an explanation.

Six years after the experience, I was about to have a cup of tea with a friend when she said, "Here's a book we just got today. Take a look." I think the book was *Jung's Man*

and His Symbols, and I was flipping through it, and suddenly there on the left-hand side of a page was a large illustration of one of the figures from my experience. I got a feeling of just sheer horror, because my immediate thought was, “My God! Somebody else knows about this!” I was so horrified that I simply threw the book and ran. It was not until several years later I discovered the circle was the yin/yang symbol. And this led to the question, how does a Chinese symbol get into the transformative experience of a New England Congregationalist who has had no contact with Taoism, New Age, paranormal activity? The question would turn my life around.

I keep hoping that some of my conviction is getting through, that we have to recognize that the universe is made up of darkness as well as light, so we'd better pay some attention to the implications of that.

VS: How did your NDE affect your relationship with IANDS and vice versa?

NEB: Within a few weeks at IANDS I began to realize that there was a name for that experience I had twenty years earlier and had been trying to bury ever since. That was uncomfortable, because I knew beyond question that not all NDEs are glorious, and not all experiencers lose their fear of death—and clearly, nobody was going to want to hear that.

But, there were occasional clues in the letters coming into the office, little hints or even outright statements that other people knew about experiences like mine— “Why don’t you people tell the truth?” Somebody had to figure out what to say to these people. And, although I had no background to start with—well, I was there, and the letters kept coming in. As for how it affected my relationship with IANDS, I think it’s accurate to say that in some ways it has kept me pretty much an outsider, even on the inside. More than a few people would prefer that my type of experience not be considered an NDE and that this conversation would happen someplace else, if at all.

In the face of so much genuinely wonderful talk about radiant NDEs, it’s been hard always to have to say, “Excuse me, but that’s not true for everyone, it’s not universal, that doesn’t always apply.” Looking from the other point of view, I think it’s been difficult for many people, because of the very fact that my experience was “negative.”

VS: One of your greatest contributions to the study of NDEs has been exposing and explaining the distressing NDE. Will you share some satisfactions and frustrations this endeavor has brought?

NEB: I suppose one satisfaction is that I didn’t stop talking just because the topic was unwelcome. The need is so great, and I’ve been able to say so little. But every once in a while I’ve heard from someone that my work has helped. That’s worth the struggle. And of course, because I didn’t stop searching for answers to give to other people, eventually there came a kind of resolution, of understanding, of my own experience. Finally getting beyond the literal interpretation and arriving at a deeper comprehension makes all the difference. And, I keep hoping that some of my conviction is getting through, that we

have to recognize that the universe is made up of darkness as well as light, so we'd better pay some attention to the implications of that.

So, there are certainly satisfactions.

One frustration is that getting this has been such a long process of stumbling along. I was a junior high English teacher when the NDE happened, not a psychologist, not a theologian, not a philosopher, had absolutely no background in psychic anything—nothing useful in that sense; so it's been like following breadcrumbs through a very dense

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forest, piecing a trail together one little chip at a time. I've been just wild, sometimes, wishing that more people from other disciplines, who might have had some insight, would speak up, would write an article for the Journal, would say something. Within near-death studies, PMH Atwater has done some fine work, moving people to accept that these NDEs exist; she has a great understanding of the difficulties for experiencers. Physician Barbara Rommer's book *Blessing in Disguise* was useful for its experience accounts, though I found it disappointing as information. Otherwise, within near-death studies there has been a scattering of articles and mentions of distressing NDEs in descriptive studies. Christopher Bache added some helpful insights as a transpersonal psychologist, and Gracia Fay Ellwood as a scholar of religious studies, and one should add Michael Grosso as a Jungian; but otherwise, there is still a great general silence. When I first felt I knew enough to say something to other people, it was with the article Bruce Greyson and I put together that was published in 1992 in the journal *Psychiatry*—30 years after my NDE! Probably my biggest continuing frustration is the general conviction that if a person has a horrifying NDE, they've done something to deserve it; there must be something about them. No researcher, to my knowledge, has analyzed moral character or previous behaviors to explain radiant NDEs, but an astonishing number of people seem quite sure that a scary NDE is a manifestation of deep-seated guilt, hostility, fear, hatred of God, rigidity, lack of love, meanness, and on and on. No wonder it's been hard for experiencers to come forward to share their difficult NDEs!

VS: As an experiencer, what question annoys you most? Why?

NEB: Probably the one I dislike the most is, "Do you believe these NDEs? Are they really true? Do you really believe near-death experiences?" It's such an annoying little mosquito of a question because it indicates just such a lack of thought. They are experiences! You can't ask people, "Is your experience true?" any more than you can ask someone with an abscessed tooth if their experience of pain is true. You're having the experience; of course it's true—as a genuine experience. Now, what does it mean? That is something different. Do I believe these experiences? Of course I believe them. Do I believe they are literally true? That's a different question with a far more complex answer.

VS: What question do you wish more people would ask?

NEB: I wish more people would look at the NDE and ask, “And so...?”

The horizon is so very much wider than what we’re looking at. There’s entirely too much stopping at the literal level, at the sensational level, thinking that the experience itself is all there is, or that it’s enough. I wish people would wonder more about what these experiences point to—both the beautiful ones and the difficult ones—not just that

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everything is wonderful and there’s “life after death.” What does it mean that there are both bliss and the abyss? Why all these continuing visual images across millennia? What are all of these amazing spiritual experiences trying to tell us about being, about ourselves, about the nature of the universe and the way it works? What are we supposed to do with the information? What will it take to make us change?

VS: Do experiencers, as Garrison Keillor says, have “the answer to life’s persistent questions”?

NEB: I think some do, but I suspect that, for the most part, those people go quietly in the world and make few speeches.

The idea that experiencers come back with answers is part of the myth of the NDE, the myth that it’s all wonderful. (And because we haven’t looked hard enough at a bigger picture, IANDS hasn’t done much to address this.) It seems to me that many experiencers have a glimpse of an answer, but don’t know how to interpret it or don’t know how to work at how to live it. Too many folks get stuck in self-congratulations for their feeling of being special, for having “evolved”, or they get sidetracked with psychic abilities, or having had a powerhouse personal experience. Some think they have Ultimate Truth, and can’t accept that there are also very different perspectives.

It’s bound to be more pleasurable to marvel at a glorious NDE than to dig into one’s own psychodynamics to clean house afterwards, or to explore the history and disciplines surrounding these experiences that the religious traditions and Buddhism have found helpful. Some good words are there—“love, learning, service”—but too often actions don’t follow. Many people don’t want the information, they want only the experience, or they don’t see how knowing about something like this can be helpful. And, a good number of experiencers suffer deeply, and wonder why IANDS hasn’t said more to help them understand what’s going on. It’s complex, this business of revelation and communication.

In fact, the messages have been with us since well before Deuteronomy, and in the Gospel, and the Koran and the Sutras, and in all the religious and mystical traditions; and each time there’s a breakthrough, the convinced have to struggle with their egos, and there’ll be a group of people who know that “This news can change the world!” And of

course, they're right, but the work of self-discovery and self-discipline is terribly difficult, so inevitably the great "shazam" doesn't happen and the world goes on un-rescued. The deepest enigma for human beings remains learning to live what we say we believe. That's the hard part.

VS: How have perceptions about NDEs changed, from your 28-year perspective in the field?

NEB: The most obvious shift is that the near-death experience is now so well known that it has become the stock visual image for dying. Thirty years ago, when someone in a movie or soap opera died, you'd see the hand drop, or the eyes close. Now the room fills with light, the camera pulls up, and there is the actor's body, and misty figures coming in, and everyone knows what's happening.

It's nice to know that we've helped make NDEs so much a part of the culture. On the other hand, this bland acceptance leads to a trivializing of the experience. The awe is missing, and the wonder. It's like, "Oh, yeah, ho hum, another NDE. Sweet." People (the media, certainly) tend to have accepted the superficial myth of the beautiful NDE, and stopped asking questions.

VS: What are your hopes for the future of IANDS?

NEB: It often seems a bit miraculous that this organization has kept going. The tens of thousands of expected members haven't shown up, and the starry-eyed promises of big money didn't happen, and the edge of the cliff is always just around the corner; but IANDS goes on. All these years later, and membership isn't big, but it's steady; the *Journal* is still being published, the only scholarly journal in its field, and *Vital Signs* continues, and there are still some local groups that support what we're about, and people still want good information and look to us to find it.

I have no quarrel with remaining small and doing one's work. Although, being bigger and doing more of the work would be a good thing, too. I hope that the work will encompass more of the kind of inquiry I've just mentioned, more voices from more disciplines. I hope the research involves more than trying to prove that OBEs happen. And I hope IANDS doesn't lose its head in celebrating its heart. So, like the folks from Star Trek, I hope IANDS will "Live long and prosper"—and look beyond the moment!

Amy Stringer is a contributing editor to Vital Signs.

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