
The life altering power of

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

Up to 80 percent of us have them... so why doesn't anyone like to talk about it? **Dr. Peter Nelson** has spent virtually a lifetime studying the fascinating world of paranormal and spiritual experiences. Here, he talks about how such events occur.

To those who have them, mystical, visionary and paranormal encounters have an extraordinary power and often lead to a transformation of life style, renewed capacity to cope with daily life and a belief in life as meaningful, purposeful and worthwhile. Tasks which once seemed difficult and/or impossible are no longer insurmountable and relationships with self and others seem to take on new depth and positive qualities.

Several years ago I conducted a study in which I explored the occurrence and mechanism of these praternatural experiences amongst ordinary Australians. It was surprising to learn that such encounters are common in the lives of a good many people. At first, this may seem quite strange. How do such extraordinary events arise in populations of quite ordinary people? Assuming most of these people were normal (and according to psychological tests they were), what are the mechanisms, psychological and social, which lead ordinary folk onto the road

to Damascus, as it were? Further, we might ask, as did the eminent zoologist Sir Alister Hardy, do these experiences serve some progressive purpose in the evolutionary scheme of things?

It was interesting to discover that more than eighty percent of the respondents to a non-random survey reported a wide variety of praternatural experiences. These included: encounters with God, mystical experiences, encounters with the numinous or sacred, near death experiences, visionary episodes, sensing of presences, out-of-body-experiences, extrasensory perceptions and finally, shamanistic-like 'other-world' adventures. Although we cannot conclude from this non-random survey that eighty percent of the Australian population has had religious and/or paranormal experiences, it would not seem unreasonable to assume that better than *forty* percent, or two in five, of the ordinary population have one or more of these experiences in a lifetime — a statistic that has been corroborated by surveys in other countries.



"Raphaelsque Head Exploding" By Salvador Dalí

"The feeling of "oneness" and incredible order in the universe.. and the euphoria .. have happened out of the blue with no wanting many times. I remember one incident when I was washing up. Suddenly, every action took on a special meaning and somehow fitted into a higher order or unity." — A report from Peter Nelson's survey of mystical and spiritual experiences.

So why do such events appear to be rare? Considering how reticent most Australians are about admitting to experiences of this kind, it's no surprise. However, when asked to talk about their experiences by a non-judgemental and sympathetic interviewer, many readily launched into their stories of intense transformative experience. These ranged from minor premonitions of events which later occurred, to out-of-body experiences, to visions, to encounters with 'spirit' forces or presences, divine or otherwise, to full blown mystical experiences in which there was a dissolution of personal self and a merging with what was felt to be the

'ultimate ground of being', 'truth', or God. After listening to almost two hundred of these interesting tales the question remained as to whether there were some hidden common psychological threads which could provide a clue as to why, seemingly at random, people have these experiences without apparently seeking them in a conscious way.

First, there appears to be a cluster of predisposing personality factors which

seem to make some individuals more likely to have praternatural experiences than others. Such people are high in a factor called 'Absorption', which is the capacity to enter wholly and completely into whatever they are doing. Such individuals tend not to notice time passing and when watching a movie, for example, they so completely lose themselves in the action, they feel as though they are actually in the scene they are witnessing.

In other words, these individuals are extremely good at suspending the scrutiny of self-monitoring in a way which leads to a more total experiential participation in what they do. We can think of these people as having a talent for entering trance states.

Another important personality factor which facilitates praternatural experiences is the possession of a higher than average level of a positive emotional responsiveness called 'positive affectivity'. Associated with this is a greater sense of well-being and confidence which perm-

eates all aspects of the individual's life. This greater positive outlook is most likely connected to the other major cluster of personality factors which appears to underlie the occurrence of praternatural experiences: reduced conformity to traditional ideas, less emotional constraint and a higher capacity for risk-taking. In other words, praternaturally prone individuals are more willing to stand apart from the mainstream and are less constrained emotionally and interpersonally. Possibly, of course, this lessened conformity and greater interpersonal expansiveness are a by-product of the experiences themselves, although it is most likely that one leads to the other in a self-reinforcing cycle.

As contradictory as it may seem, the most prominent triggering circumstance for praternatural experiences is the presence of a fairly high level of background stress prior to the encounter. In addition, this background of emotional

tension must suddenly and abruptly be altered by entering, for example, into a deep, absorbed concentration (such as listening intently to music or deeply meditating). The whole process seems to work best, however, when one is socially isolated. Under such conditions, the final step appears to be the sudden relinquishing of some emotional control (i.e., letting

go of whatever it is one is emotionally fixed on at the time). This tends to create a sense of relief thus opening the door to a state of consciousness amenable to experiencing the praternatural.

Such triggering activities help to accentuate the personality characteristics conducive to altered states. The underlying mechanism can thus be conceived of as a sudden switch into an altered state, away from one's usual mindset. During this shift, background personality traits are pushed beyond their normal limits. When this happens, our day to day conscious state, with its

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"The day before my 21st birthday, in the middle of crashing a car which had gone out of control, flying through the air, I saw, and felt two hands placed over mine on the wheel, and the wheel was wrenched around to the other direction. The hands were greenish white, very strong, old man's hands, with gnarled knuckles and raised semi-lunar valves. The sleeves were cat-tan-like, and disappeared into nothingness. The other occupant of the car also had his hands on the wheel, and felt the strength of the wrench, but did not see the hands. Neither of us was hurt. I had the mental message at the time it happened; 'not yet. You have much more to learn.' I have been doing my best to learn ever since." -- Report of an experience.



Peter Nelson

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ordinary perceptions and awarenesses, is disrupted and replaced by another consciousness 'state' with its associated altered reality frame. This other 'state' can be thought of as an entrance into a radically different perceptual world in which objects, feelings and thoughts take on new meanings and in which other realities are perceived.

From this new perspective the world is experienced as radically different. So different, in fact, that these experiences often lead those who have them to a total re-evaluation of their lives. Many of those who have had praternatural experiences, which give rise to a feeling of having communicated with the 'larger reality', subsequently feel that it becomes easier for them to connect harmoniously and effectively with the mundane day to day world. This new communication appears to be not only interpersonal, but intrapersonal. Thus, a new clearer 'inner' communication becomes the basis for a renewal of values and the opening of creativity, which then finds positive expression in relationships and in all life's activities ranging from the arts and sciences to religion and politics.

Further reading:

Nelson, P. L. (1989). A survey of mystical, visionary and remote perception experiences. In G. K. Zollschan, J. F. Schumaker, & G. F. Walsh (Eds.), *Exploring the paranormal: Perspectives on belief and experience* Dorset, U.K.: Prism.

Nelson, P. L. (1990). The technology of the praternatural: An empirically based model of transpersonal experiences. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, No. 22.*

Peter Nelson is a research consultant and academic currently working as Senior Research Director for the Christchurch Methodist Mission. He has degrees in psychology and psycho-phenomenology and has studied spiritual and altered state experiences for more than 20 years. He has taught at universities in Australia and the U.S. and has consulted for a wide range of government and private organisations.



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