

**SHARING THE LIGHT:
AN ANALYSIS OF RERC ARCHIVAL ACCOUNTS
DESCRIBING SHARED EXPERIENCES
OF UNUSUAL LIGHT.**

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Abstract:

Whilst conducting research in the RERC archive looking into the possibility of a common core to religious experience, a number of shared accounts of encounters with unusual light were found. The importance of these was immediately apparent, not least because of the interest shown by researchers in recent years in a variety of accounts of shared religious experiences and because of the possibilities such experiences offer for surmounting the so-called 'problem of verification' of religious experience. This paper seeks to present in detail the accounts of shared experiences of light found in the archive, to evaluate them, and to draw conclusions from them concerning their evidential value and resemblance to other comparable non-archival accounts.

Sharing the Light

The so-called 'problem of verification' is well known within the philosophy of religion whenever claims to religious experience are considered. Such unusual experiences, it is argued, differ from 'ordinary' experiences in that they are usually private, solitary, episodes. The Virgin Mary, for example, appears to prefer to appear to only one witness – even when others may be present, as was the case at Lourdes - and in generally solitary locations (Harris, 1999: 4). Even many dramatic conversions – many involving unusual visual and auditory phenomena – tend to occur when the convert is alone: such as Alphonse Ratisbonne's celebrated conversion vision in the church of San Andrea delle Fratte in Rome as reported by William James (James, 1960: 226) Given this recognition of the solitariness of religious experience, it is frequently asserted that such episodes are susceptible to this-worldly, naturalistic interpretations rather than other-worldly, supernaturalistic ones: such as, for example, that the subject was hallucinating and in some way (rarely specified) 'projecting' the vision outwards from mental space. By this reckoning, the evidential force of religious experience as 'proof' of supernatural, transcendent realities is weakened by the fact that one person's subjective impression of an apparently external presence or entity cannot be checked against the simultaneous experiences of others at the same location and in the same circumstances.

Indeed, in this context, it is worth noting that many experiences widely dubbed 'paranormal' are susceptible to exactly the same criticisms. By their very nature, for example, Near-Death Experiences may be expected to be private, solitary affairs. A prophetic dream, unless it is shared with others, is similarly private; as are so-called UFO 'abductions' which generally remain hidden even from 'abductees' themselves until subsequent hypnotic sessions 'unlock' them. Indeed, even apparitions and ghosts seem to prefer solitary observers, Celia Green and Charles McCreery, for example, only being able to devote one short chapter to 'collective' accounts in their seminal 1968 study for the Oxford Institute for Psychophysical Research (Green and McCreery, 1989: 41-8).

All this being acknowledged, there are, it is true, admittedly limited ways of sharing another's religious or paranormal experience. In a recent and widely discussed study, *Why God Won't Go Away*, Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili have presented the results of experiments that have attempted to allow observers to 'share' the experiences of meditators in deep, meditative states by using advanced brain imaging equipment to map the parts of meditators' brains effected by such states. The results of these experiments are interesting, revealing that the 'input' to the Posterior Superior Parietal Lobe is blocked at such times. Given that this is the very part of the brain responsible for differentiating the boundaries of the self from the rest of the world, Newberg and D'Aquili surmise that this part of the brain is involved in those deepest experiences of mystics in which the subject merges or fuses with everything else: effectively becoming 'one' with it. Indeed, a central contention of *Why God Won't Go Away* is that part of the brain is 'wired' for religious experience, and the authors devote considerable attention to the implications arising from this (Newberg and D'Aquili: 2001). Meanwhile, at Laurentian University in Canada, neuroscientist Michael Persinger continues to carry out similar brain-mapping experiments, even claiming to have produced a device which, by stimulating selected parts of the brain, can actually induce certain types of religious and paranormal experience at will (Cotton 1995: 204-25; Persinger: 1999). These experiments seem in many ways similar to the experiments in cortical stimulation undertaken by Wilder Penfield and Sir John Eccles fifty years ago which showed how stimulating specific areas of the brain could generate perceptual experience and sensations of action (Eccles 1966: xv, 218, 447; 1970: 83, 115, 127). Clearly, the future looks promising as regards our understanding of the brain's role in creating and/or mediating religious, paranormal, and other 'varieties' of transcendent experience, just as we already know the key part played by specific areas of the brain in generating perceptual and other 'normal' modes of human experiencing.

Even in the absence of such interesting research, however, there is still a large enough corpus of testimony to shared experiences within such contexts which allows investigators considerable scope for enquiry. Whilst, for example, collective religious visions are much rarer than private, solitary visions, they are by no means unreported. On the contrary, on repeated occasions numerous witnesses have experienced Marian apparitions, together with attendant phenomena which frequently include unusual displays of light. At Medjugorje in the former Yugoslavia, for example, the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM) on occasion appeared to up to six young visionaries simultaneously, and sometimes many more persons were witnesses to the extraordinary phenomena that accompanied her appearances, as the following testimony dramatically shows:

About 50 neighbours went along...and we all began praying. All at once seven or eight of us began shouting, "Look at that light." It came from the sky, as if the sky had opened up about ten metres, and it came towards us. It stopped over the hole in the ground (he pointed to where the people had been digging up the earth). There was a wooden cross in the hole and

the light seemed to stream from it. It was as if a balloon of light had burst and there were thousands of tiny stars everywhere. We were just bathed in light...We were all crying. As long as I live I shall never forget that night (Craig, 1988: 90).

The association of unusual light phenomena with apparitions of the BVM and sometimes witnessed by large numbers of people is not confined to Medjugorge. The widely reported 'dance of the sun', occurring at Fatima in 1917, was witnessed by approximately 150 people, of which one, a taxi driver, reported:

I was with a large group of people outside the church, and suddenly I noticed the sun doing strange things ... it began to swing to and fro ... Finally a ray of light separated itself from the sun and travelled like the rays of a rainbow towards the place where the Virgin had first appeared. It then rested on the church tower, on which a clear image of the Virgin appeared (Craig, 1988: 91-2).

Given the opportunities for corroboration of detail that such experiences offer, it is not surprising that researchers in recent years have spent considerable amounts of time looking for shared accounts across a range of religious and paranormal experiences that can be checked and, if possible, verified. By their very nature, many UFO reports offer real possibilities of investigation and verification, not least because such phenomena are often aerial and hence – potentially – visible to considerable numbers of witnesses. In this context, for example, consider the following account of a celebrated UFO landing at Rendlesham Forest in Suffolk in December of 1980 which bears interesting comparison with the extract, above, describing the light phenomena at Medjugorge:

Someone reported over the air: "Here it comes. Here it comes. Here it comes." Over the far end of the field, from the direction of the North Sea I noticed a small red light. The light came closer each second. At first I thought it was an aircraft, but it came at us too fast and silently ... The red light cleared the pines bordering the field and quickly made a downward arc until it was directly over the illuminated fog. Only about 20 feet above the ground, the object was now stationary and roughly the size of a basketball ... As my mind tried to register what I was looking at the ball of light exploded in a blinding flash. Shards of light and particles fell into the woods. I couldn't move; I tried to cover my eyes, but was too late (Warren and Robbins, 1997: 45).

As dramatic as such shared experiences may sound, it is worth noting that in recent years other religious and/or paranormal experiences have been found to be shared: some, indeed, that would appear as very unlikely candidates for shared experience indeed. The field of near-death studies, for example, has very recently acknowledged and presented evidence of the existence of shared Near-Death-Experiences: known variously as 'empathic NDEs', 'death coincidents', 'conjoint near-death experiences' and 'mutual NDEs'. No less an authority than Raymond Moody, for example, who did much to stimulate the modern interest in NDEs with his bestselling 1975 study *Life After Life* has in very recent years presented a small number of such cases, including that of 'Joan':

While sleeping beside her terminally ill husband, Joan dreamed that they were strolling down a pathway, through a meadow, and into a dark tunnel. Inside, a soft yet brilliant light surrounded them and illuminated their way. She was feeling love and peace as never before when her husband said, "Joanie, you must go back now." At first she ignored him and continued to stroll, but when he tugged at her elbow, she spun around. To her amazement, he appeared healthy, athletic, and without glasses – much as he had in his youth. "You must go back," he repeated. "It isn't your time. I'll be back for you when it is." Joan sensed that they were at a point of no return and turned to leave, but just then a noise outside their window startled her awake. Opening her eyes, she saw that her dear husband had continued his journey into death (Moody, 2001: 163).

The recent spate of interest in shared experiences of an unusual nature is by no means confined to the field of NDE research. As might be anticipated, the huge popular interest in angels and angelology in recent years has thrown up a significant number of conjoint angelic encounters. Emma Heathcote-James, for example, in a recent popular study of angel visitations drawing on more than 800 case studies for its analysis, includes several, of which the following is representative:

My grandmother ... and her younger sister were in Eastbourne to visit my great-grandmother who was very ill and not expected to live very long. Walking away from the house one afternoon – and having found her very much at peace, though quite obviously very poorly – they were discussing the situation and, no doubt, preparing for the inevitable, when they both stopped in their tracks and caught hold of one another, saying ‘did you see that?’ They both – independently – claimed to have seen two shining winged people, who [they] were convinced must have been angels, gently escorting a human away. It was over in a second, but my grandma and aunty never forgot this experience, as they heard on their way home that their mum had died – at the precise moment they saw the angels ... (Heathcote-James, 2001: 177-8 and see Osis and Haraldsson, 1997: 34-46)

There are, to be sure, elements of the above account that compare with other, similar, perhaps ‘stylized’ accounts reported globally and cross-culturally. In particular, the theme of perceiving some sort of apparition – recognizably human or angelic – at the point of another’s death bears close comparison with ‘crisis apparition’ experiences reported virtually universally and already the subject of detailed academic investigation by the Society for Psychical Research and other, similar bodies. Reflection on the possibility that testimonies to unusual experiences of light – including shared experiences – may indeed be a consistent, cross-cultural and trans-historical phenomenon leads neatly to a consideration of the consistent appearance of unusual light phenomena within superstitions and folklore separated – sometimes widely – by time, space, and culture. Whilst the study of superstition and folkloristics is vast, it may be useful to consider just one consistently-encountered light-related superstition here: that of the corpse candle, variously known also as the hobby lantern, jenny-burnt-tail, kit-in-the-candlestick and the canwyll corfe. The variety of names by which this unusual light is known even in a country as relatively small as Britain reveals the fact that it is sighted in a large number of regions, and throughout most of them it is thought to be a harbinger of death: hence the association of its candle-like properties with the notion of a corpse soon to follow. As with the other ‘varieties’ of unusual light forms we have so far examined, however, the corpse candle has its fair share of multiple witnesses, as this testimony collected by paranormal researcher Paul Devereux makes clear:

It looked like a bright candle flame, without the candle; and it kept on coming nearer and nearer to us...It passed by us, on the other side of the hedge, just where the footpath came up from the valley. It went on, hopped along a few inches from the ground, and then vanished in the distance (Devereux, 2001: 165).

Devereux adds, interestingly, that such lights are reported globally, although different interpretations are frequently put on their appearance. In Brazil, for example, such a lightform is known as a Mae de Ouro, which means Mother of Gold. Here, far from being a harbinger of death, the light is seen as a very good sign and as leading the way to a site of buried treasure. Devereux adds various other cross-cultural parallels to the corpse candle in his recent study, *Haunted Land*, including the so-called Hessdalen Lights of Norway, the Chota-admis Lanterns of Darjeeling, and the ‘Bodhisattva Lights’ of the holy Chinese mountain of Wu Tai Shan. In each case, it seems at least plausible that whilst the light may be a manifestation of the same ‘core’ phenomenon (whatever that might be), the interpretation which is ascribed to it may be a function of the beliefs of the culture in which

it is found. In Darjeeling, for example, the chota-admis are little men and the lights are their lanterns. In Chinese Buddhism the lights are sometimes seen as expressions of the Dharma. Meanwhile, UFO researchers have descended on Hessdalen regularly over a number of years in the hope that precise photographing and measurement of the size and activities of the lights there may give clues to the still-elusive mystery of Unidentified Flying Objects. Indeed, no less an authority than J. Allen Hynek, one-time astronomical consultant to the US Air Force on the subject of UFOs during its own official investigation, was studying the lights at Hessdalen almost up to the time of his death in 1986 (Devereux and Brookesmith, 2001: 138-59).

Questions

All of the above examples, diverse though they may appear, are connected by the fact that what is reported in each case is some sort of unusual experience of light that appears to defy conventional, rational explanation. And although the oldest case, that of the 'dancing sun' at Fatima, is a little under 100 years old, it is worth underlining the very obvious point that unusual lights have been reported in earlier ages also. The corpse candle itself is part of a tradition of lights tracing the routes of future funerals going back many hundreds of years. In a very different context, it will be recalled that in at least one account we possess, that of Acts 22: 5-11, the 'heavenly' light on the road to Damascus is described as being seen not just by Paul but by his awestruck companions too. Given the – for some – surprising weight of evidence in favour of such a rich historical and cross-cultural, not to mention contemporary, tradition of shared encounters with unusual lights, it became clear early on that any study concerned to uncover and evaluate accounts of light within the RERC archive would need to take detailed account of it.

Indeed, from the outset it was clear that the occurrence of a significant number of such shared accounts in the RERC archive would be potentially revealing in itself. It would also be interesting to see if such shared experiences contributed significantly to any quest to find a 'common core' to religious experience. In addition, it might be possible, if such accounts did turn out to exist, to determine what percentage of the total number of accounts containing unusual lights were shared. Other possibilities, however, quickly presented themselves. What contexts, for example, might such shared encounters occur in? Would they be significantly different from single-person encounters? Or would they be consistent with the other categories of experience the archive contained? Then there was the question of the effects of the experiences on their subjects. What might the overall emotional responses of witnesses to the events they experienced be? Would the experiences lead to positive – or conversely – negative fruits? Were there any accounts in which multiple witnesses had reported the same events, thoughts, feelings, and fruits: perhaps independently of each other? And finally: what of the 'categories' of shared experiences themselves? Did the archive contain any accounts comparable to those reported in the existing literature? Were there, for example, any shared Marian apparitions, shared UFO sightings, or shared angelic encounters? Perhaps more interestingly still: did the archive contain any significant categories of shared experience totally unlike anything in the literature? Would it yield new categories of shared experiences of unusual lights that might push our appreciation and understanding of the phenomenon in new – and perhaps unexpected – directions? Overall, and given the potential for understanding such encounters with light offered by shared accounts, it was hoped that their unusual nature and broad contemporary appeal might yield some of the project's most useful and significant conclusions.

Analysis

At first sight, the number of cases of shared experiences within this category appeared disappointingly low: only 10 accounts out of a total of almost 400 examined. However, the content of these cases was such that the particular time and attention devoted to them was richly repaid, as will become clear as analysis proceeds.

Of the ten cases, one featured a Marian apparition experienced by two soldiers on patrol in the Falls Road area of Belfast, Northern Ireland, in October 1969. As the respondent tells the story:

Until October 1969 I could take or leave religion. I believed there was some sort of a God, and that was that, I had an inborn hatred of the Pope and everything he stood for.

Then, while I was serving with the Queen's regiment in Belfast, a strange thing happened to me.

One cold, damp night I was patrolling the grounds of a Catholic school just off the Falls road, and cursing the people who lived in that area under my breath as I went on my way.

About an hour passed and I had a feeling that I was not alone. I must say, I was surprised that the feeling did not frighten me, as it was about 2.45 in the morning and quite dark. Suddenly I felt quite warm and at peace not only with myself, but with everyone. From across the road the black shape of a Catholic Church seemed to draw my attention. When I finally turned, I saw in the sky a white light; as I looked, the light gradually took the shape of the virgin Mary. My friend came into the courtyard at this moment and he saw exactly the same as I did. She was standing, her arms out stretched towards us. It nearly made my friend die of fright, but it had the opposite effect on me, although our lady didn't speak, all those misgivings I once had, melted away. Soon after this, I converted to the Catholic faith, and have never looked back.

I know that God, in his personal love for me, sent this manifestation of our blessed lady to save me from hell (3008).

A number of features deserve particular comment here. The apparition has a dramatically contrasting effect on both experiencers: seemingly creating warmth and peace in the narrator, whilst frightening his friend – a fellow soldier on patrol, perhaps. The fruits of the experience are particularly striking also: leading to the conversion of the writer to Catholicism and an apparently dramatic change of heart toward those he once despised. Indeed, this feature is particularly noteworthy for another reason. It is often commented on in the relevant literature that visions correspond to prior expectation, leading to the conclusion that, somehow, experiencers' cultural and linguistic repertoires of beliefs, concepts and values somehow cause the experiences they then have, shaping and essentially creating them to conform to expectations. Don Cupitt expresses this position well, if somewhat flippantly, when he remarks within the context of a discussion of Marian apparitions that:

Mary's various personal appearances on Earth ... must be carefully pre-planned from the heavenly end. She must be kitted out for each occasion with the right skin-color, costume, dialect, message to deliver, and so on; and there must be no mistakes. Think how traumatic it would be if she were to speak the wrong dialect, or to garble her message! Fortunately, one has never heard of a theophany, or of any other 'ophany of a denizen of a supernatural world, in which the one who appeared wore the wrong clothes or fluffed her lines. It just doesn't happen, does it? (Cupitt, 1998:38)

The implication here and elsewhere in his discussion of such visionary 'encounters' is that prior beliefs – primarily language-driven – give rise to and shape the types of experiences visionaries have. It is absolutely not the case that they are seeing visitants from other realms as they are 'in themselves', and not even the case that they are 'clothing' somehow 'authentic' visions with post-experiential interpretation but, rather, that language 'comes first' and hence creates the conditions and possibility of their existing at all. As he writes of

another type of unusual encounter: “Only after human beings have begun to think of building spaceships does human religious experience begin to include apparitions of flying saucers.” (p.38) Cupitt’s position, shared to various extents by fellow philosophical theologians George Lindbeck and Steven Katz, is that, somehow (usually in unspecified ways) language creates experience (Katz: 1978; Lindbeck: 1984). Yet a moment’s reflection on the above account shows how problematical such a position is. For what is Cupitt to make of that mass of experiences in which experiencers see what they do not expect to see or, as in the above account, undergo experiences that they were previously resistant and even hostile to? If expectation does indeed create experience, what of situations in which experience positively confounds expectation? Of course, Cupitt may reply that, despite the deliberate disavowals, experiencers such as the Falls Road soldier are seeing what they expected to see *really*, perhaps even unconsciously. Whilst recognizing the validity of this position, it should be borne in mind that it weakens considerably the force of the argument, for it means in practice that there is nothing to stop us modifying and moulding any set of expectations in any way whatsoever we like in order to conform them to any eventual experience that we are trying to explain.

Close Encounters of the Strangest Kind

Two of the 10 shared accounts involved unusual UFO-type encounters. Of these, one took place whilst the subject and two friends were camping approximately 90 miles from Nairobi, in Kenya, at an unspecified date. As the respondent’s testimony describes:

At about 7 p.m we had set up our camp at the foot of a hill in the Matthews range, in the foothills of Mount Kenya. It had just got dark and we were just sitting down to enjoy a drink, when suddenly a bright ball of light emerged from the top of the hill and moved quite quickly in an arc across the sky. I said, ‘Did you see that?’ to my companions. The husband had seen it because he had been facing in the same direction as I had, but the wife had not, since her back was to it. Aeroplanes do sometimes [fly] overhead, but I thought this moved too quickly and was only a single light, whereas planes at night usually have several. I thought it might have been a military flare or something like that but subsequent enquiries showed there had been no army exercises in the area at the time. So we just called it an U.F.O – that is, unidentified by us (4469).

As unusual as this account is, it is as nothing compared to the second, much longer account in the archive involving a shared encounter with a UFO-type lightform. This account, submitted to the RERC in March 1987, describes an experience that took place in August 1968 when the respondent was on holiday with his girlfriend and another couple at a rented cottage in Irish Hills, Michigan. They arrived late at night and the first few days were apparently uneventful. The respondent then describes how he was in his car with his girlfriend, at night, drinking beer, when:

Suddenly she got very tense and nervous and said there’s something out there! About this time the other couple had come along and asked what was wrong and she told them the same thing. My friend and I said we would go up the road and see if we could see anything. My girlfriend became very upset and insisted that we both stay with them in the car. There were absolutely no noises of any kind from insects or other wildlife whatsoever which was most unusual as it was a rather warm summer night.

As he and I approached the road to the cottage area I noticed a pulsating light down the road a distance that was in the shape of a surfboard and appeared to be hovering about a foot off the ground. Knowing that I was not drunk or hallucinating and not wanting to sound crazy, I said nothing but was greatly relieved when he asked me if I saw that light; and being relieved, said, yes.

As I stated the light seemed to pulsate, first dimming and then growing brighter. My friend who was a good deal more braver than I started walking towards the light in spite of my suggestion that we return to the girls and the car.

As we approached or rather tried to approach the light it would recede from us and only return when we would backtrack our footsteps. Several attempts were made to approach and each time the light would recede.

At this point, the pair of friends were distracted by a second strange phenomenon: “a sound coming from the brush on the side of the road to our left” apparently approaching the road and then moving away, back into the brush. Clearly, the writer’s courage was indeed considerably less than that of his friend, who then decided to go into the brush with a knife and torch to investigate the sound more closely. Finally, however, not wanting his friend to be left alone “facing God knows what” he changed his mind and followed him, only to find the foliage too thick and impenetrable. Back on the road again, they began to return to the car, “when the noise again started only this time much closer to us.” The writer continues:

As we again paused to listen to the sound, suddenly from a bush directly in front of us there came a single loud expulsion of air as if it were someones dying breath. I was petrified and the knife literally fell from my hand and I couldn’t move. I don’t know how long I stood there but vaguely remember ... my friend pulling my arm and leading me back to the car.

Upon our return to the car both girls themselves were in a state of terror and stated that they felt as if they were being watched and heard heavy breathing. It was at this point that the experience was just too much for me and I broke down and started crying due to the terror I had felt (4812).

Interestingly, the account continues by describing subsequent attempts made by the writer to determine the exact nature of the phenomena that had frightened him so. The possibility that the ‘surfboard’ shaped light might be swamp gas was quickly discarded on the grounds that nothing resembling a swamp “or for that matter any wet area” could be found in the vicinity. Later still, after the holiday had ended, the writer discovered that another party in the state of Wisconsin had experienced something similar on another occasion, although this piece of potentially corroborative detail is weakened somewhat when the overall size of the state is considered: quite apart from the fact that the writer’s experience took place in the state of Michigan.

Nonetheless, his experience seems to have had a spiritual affect on him at least somewhat akin to that of the Falls Road soldier whose account has already been examined, above. For the Michigan respondent, the overall ‘fruits’ of the event included a turning to Hatha Yoga and a deepened interest in spiritual matters, and he adds to his account of his experience that it “has had a profound impact on my point of view and life philosophy as well.” He ends by wondering, somewhat ruefully, ‘... what would have happened if we had let the light come to us.’

Both the Kenyan and Michigan UFO-related cases contain significant parallels with a number of cases that can be found in the now-massive corpus of UFO literature. Whilst a consideration of these would take us beyond the scope of the current work, it is worth pointing to the fact that there may be other cases in the archive that would support a study of UFOs or UFO-type phenomena. The Kenyan case bears interesting comparisons both with other cases reported from Africa, and also with the work of Paul Devereux and Michael Persinger who have long maintained that unusual lights may emerge from the ground, often at places of tectonic strain and frequently just before, during, or after episodes involving earthquakes and/or smaller earth tremors. Whilst the Kenyan case appears to have aroused in the author nothing more than a mild curiosity, it is also worth noting that, like the

Michigan case, it was felt worthy of subsequent checking by the parties involved who appear to have satisfied themselves that it was unrelated to any military exercises taking place in the area at the time. As regards the Michigan case, it is interesting that the attempt to discount the 'swamp gas' hypothesis reveals the writer to have been at least partly acquainted with UFO literature at the time of his experience: for the notion of an unusual light being the result of such glowing gas was offered by UFO expert and consultant to the US Air Force J. Allen Hynek as an explanation of a March 1966 experience of unusual light reported by a farmer and his son near the town of Dexter; again in Michigan (1). Overall, however, both the Kenyan and Michigan cases contain features long-familiar to UFOlogists: although the odd breathing from the bush in the Michigan case is unparalleled anywhere else in the literature.

Shadows Without Lights

Also unparalleled elsewhere was another interesting shared account located in the archive in which the subject and his companion found themselves casting shadows on the ground as if a strong light was present and shining on them from behind but where, in fact, no light could be discerned. The respondent, writing in 1971, refers to an event that took place "some 12 years ago" when "a friend and myself spent a few days at Easter at a remote Lakeland Inn. I was about 54, & he about 52." The subject adds that his wife, at the time of the experience, was ill and in a London nursing home. On Easter Sunday the landlord of the Inn invited the two friends to the morning church service and afterwards they began to discuss "the service and its religious aspect" before drawing very different conclusions. Clearly, whilst the friend was inclined towards a 'scientific' reading of the Bible, the subject was "a believer in the C. of E." Later, deciding on a walk before bedtime, the two friends set off:

It was a beautiful night, with no moon & only the stars & the outline of the mountains to be seen, & not a sound to be heard.

After a quarter of a mile along the lonely lane our two shadows appeared in front of us & continuing for a further ten minutes got brighter & sharper as if a bright light was behind us, but there was no light & no moon, & eventually the vision faded.

I don't mind saying that I was troubled & possibly frightened as if I was in the presence of something beyond understanding & even my learned friend was shaken.

Reflecting on the meaning of the experience in his 1971 letter, the writer adds that "I think at the time, I thought of the Bible story of the Burning Bush, & was it Moses? was also frightened." He recalls that, after the return from the trip "I told my wife the story & quite simply she said "It was only God reminding you that He is there." He adds: "Shortly after, she died" (2519).

This strange account of an invisible light casting strong shadows which is interpreted in religious ways by the subject and his wife is also rather unusual in that it troubles and frightens the respondent and even shakes the "learned friend". Unlike the Falls Road Marian apparition – and, as we shall see, unlike most of the remainder of the shared light encounters that we will consider – the experience appears to result in fear and distress rather than peace and comfort. The implication at the end of the account is that the light may have been conforming to the writer's wife's interpretation of it: coming to remind the subject of God's presence, in anticipation of his wife's passing and his own, subsequent widowhood. We do not know, because he does not tell us, whether the experience was of any genuine comfort to the writer in the years following the episode. As we will now see, however, the appearance of calming, peaceful, loving light in the midst of illness, grief,

anxiety and distress appears to be a consistent feature of a number of shared experiences of it: bringing us close to a fundamental feature of encounters with unusual lights that may point toward their possessing some kind of a common core, identity, or source.

'Crisis Lights'

Five accounts of shared experiences of light – 50% of the total number – appeared at times of clear crisis and usually in association with a serious, life threatening, illness. In some instances, the light appeared to actually presage a death: paralleling in certain respects the corpse candle tradition already discussed. If it makes any sense to talk of the light possessing or arising from a common core (or perhaps performing some sort of consistent, core function), then its appearance and sometimes comforting presence in times of human distress and duress must be considered as a primary aspect of this potential core.

This, at present tentative, conclusion is certainly suggested by some clear and intriguing consistencies exhibited by the following shared accounts. Consider this one, for example, written in August 1971 about an experience that occurred many years previously:

It was during 1914-18 war, I was 15 years old & my sister age 17 years had died with TB. Just two or three days before this happen[ed] she was in [the] same room [as me and my mother]. I was sleeping with my dear mother & I saw a most beautiful light coming from [the] corner of [the] ceiling just like we see when Our dear Lord's in pictures. I said Mum & she answer[ed] me by saying did you see it, so we both witness[ed] it.

In those days we had no Electric lighting, the street lamp was gas mantles what had to be lighted by men & also no cars, but it was most beautiful & I will never forget it (2866).

The writer of this account is clearly not an educated lady, but the attempts made (and discarded) to find alternative 'conventional' explanations of an apparently heavenly light show that the writer had clearly considered these: no electric lights, no cars, and apparently no explanation to be had from the existence of gas street lighting will do to explain the light seen. The lack of a conventional explanation for what was experienced is also present in the following account, quoted here in full:

In 1937, while still teaching, I nursed my father for five months. He died of cancer in 1966. When I learned that my aunt (mother's sister) who was one of our family, aged 84 years, was a cancer victim, I was appalled at the thought of having to nurse her. Now retired, I was able to devote myself entirely to my nursing duties which this time lasted for three months.

One night I settled my [aunt] patient for the night and sat down in my chair near her bed, with my back to the window.

Why, I do not know, but my eyes seemed drawn to the corner of the room. There, at the top of the wall shone a small light which slowly grew in size and brilliance. I could not withdraw my gaze but I had no sense of fear. I determined to be quite practical and made myself look out of the window, thinking that an outside light might be reflected in the bedroom but there was no outside light. I sat down again and kept my eyes on the light. I have never, before or after, felt such a sense of peace and comfort. I felt a powerful presence in the bedroom and I knew that I would be given Divine strength to carry on with my duty to the end. I felt an exhilaration, a peace and well-being and I knew that I had been given a manifestation of God's care for me, unworthy though I was. I went to sleep, calm and re-assured, knowing that the burden was no longer mine.

There was an unexpected sequel to my experience.

On the following night, when I had again attended my patient, I noticed that she did not, as usual, close her eyes. I followed her gaze and was surprised to realise that she was staring up above at the very place where the light had shone for me. I asked my Aunt what she was looking at. She replied: Nothing.

I said: Come on. Tell me. What do you see up there?

She replied: I'm not going to tell you. It's a secret.

My aunt died a few days later. I am convinced that we were both, however unworthy, privileged to be granted this manifestation of Divine help in our hour of need.

I can assure you that none of the above account is due to imagination. I am a very practical person (2026).

This extremely interesting testimony is noteworthy for a number of reasons. As was the case with the previous account, it is clear that the light manifests at a point of great anxiety and in the midst of a situation where a life is nearing its end. To this extent, in fact, it bears close comparison with a number of comparable accounts collected by William Barrett of visions reported by the dying and reproduced in his 1927 classic *Deathbed Visions* and also with a smaller number of shared accounts of such visions reproduced by Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson in their more recent study *At The Hour of Death* (Barrett: 1986; Osis and Haraldsson: 1997). In addition, the light in the account clearly brings with it – at least for the carer – a great sense of peace, bestowing feelings of comfort, exhilaration, well-being, calmness, reassurance and strength to endure in the midst of a situation of clear distress: another characteristic of deathbed visions generally, and reminiscent of the previous respondent's description of the light as "most beautiful". Whilst not witnessed simultaneously by aunt and niece, there is a strong implication that the same light was being gazed at by both of them on two separate but related occasions in this account: at least, the shared location of what was seen implies that this was so - although it is interesting that the carer did not see the light on the second occasion when, we may assume, the aunt did. Finally, it is of note that, as with the previous account, the writer went to some lengths to discount 'conventional' explanations of where the light may have come from before concluding that it must have had some sort of Divine origin. At one point she actually relates how she looked away from the light and out of the window in order to look for an outside source. In addition, as an appendage to her original handwritten account, she adds a diagram of the room designed to show how the location of the light could not have been outside and hence shining through the window. As with the previous account, this piece of corroborative detail, whilst not absolutely conclusive, is at the very least impressive.

Another comparable account, equally impressive in detail, can be added to those already examined. It was sent to the Centre in August 1971 and concerns an experience that took place in 1932. In the account, the writer, the writer's "premature, frail" baby son, and her mother went together to a bedroom they were to share after mother and baby had arrived in Penarth, the mother's home town, where the experience took place. As the writer states:

We put the baby in a bassinet in the corner, on my side of the double bed. There was one tall window only, well away from the cot, which was in a corner, and it was a back bedroom (house built in 1910).

About 2 am (it was a still night) I awoke suddenly and was conscious at once of a BLUE light in the room. I turned my head and saw suspended over the baby's cot a large blue star which remained there, distinct in outline, for quite five minutes and then faded away.

In some astonishment, (but I recollect, no fright), I lay in silence for about an hour. Suddenly, the light appeared again, and once more, the star. This time, a soft voice said quietly, 'Dolly?' – it was my mother. I replied 'yes'. 'Do you see what I am seeing?' The answer was 'yes', and she further astonished me by remarking that she had been aware of it an hour previously but had been afraid to see if I was awake, or had noticed it, in case she was suffering perhaps from 'delusions'. To this day, I do not know why either of us saw this phenomenon. The star was right over the cot (2287).

As with the previous two accounts it is clear that the light appears in a context of anxiety, for we may reasonably assume that the frail, premature son was giving some cause for concern. There is a difference, however, concerning the events that were to follow the episode in that the son survived: going on, as the writer states, to gain a degree at Cardiff University and to himself father a child. The 'normality' of his life, however, only appears to have reinforced her view that the light was inexplicable, for she ends her account by remarking that "This experience is in no way explainable, as my son has done (so far) nothing remarkable to help mankind or distinguished himself in any way."

Another apparent difference between this and the previous two accounts is that the light appears to have had no calming influence on either the writer or her mother: the only emotions recounted are astonishment and a lack of fear. It is also interesting to note that the light appeared not once but twice and was seen by both witnesses on both occasions. As with the previous two accounts, however, the writer entertains and discards 'conventional' explanations for the light. As she states, there was only one window in the room, it was well away from the cot, and the bedroom was at the back of the house where presumably no outside streetlights were shining. The colour of the light also deserves brief comment here. As is clear, on both occasions it is described as blue. Whilst we have not so far seen any other descriptions of the light as having this colour within the category of shared experience, analysis of the other categories of light experiences in the archive will shortly make clear that blue lights are rather consistently encountered. It will be enough here simply to note this fact before returning for a deeper discussions of the possible implications of this colour in a future paper.

A further incidence of an apparently shared experience of light at a point of extreme crisis is provided by the following account which took place at an undisclosed date and location. In it, the writer reports how:

My father had had a severe heart attack and I laid him down in bed, semiconscious. Then put out the light and let him sleep. Suddenly he turned his head and looked over to a corner of the room. There was a bright light shining, which, on looking at my father, was reflected in his eyes. 'I have seen the Glory of God and I am not to die yet' he said. He lived and walked about for another year. I am 69 and can see that light in my memory as if it were yesterday. Never have I seen a light which could compare with it (2031).

In addition to its appearance at a point of crisis involving life-threatening danger, it is clear that this experience, like the other 'crisis lights' examined, possesses an unusual nature. The writer makes no mention of looking for a 'conventional' source but strongly implies that it was no ordinary light by making reference to its incomparable quality. The father apparently survived his encounter with it by a year, suggesting the intriguing possibility that this might actually be a 'shared NDE': both father and daughter seeing the light that, whilst frequently reported by NDErs, does not necessarily presage the immediate death of them. No calming feelings are reported by the subject, but the father's exclamation strongly suggests that the encounter was both positive and meaningful and even, perhaps, communicated something to him.

What has been emerging with particular force over the course of this analysis is the existence of a particular category of light experience that we might term 'crisis light'. As has already been suggested, the occurrence of unusual lights, defying 'conventional' explanations, and manifesting at times of extreme crisis might even be said to hint at a common core or function that such lights possess. What has been additionally interesting and emerging within this paper has been the fact that so many encounters with unusual lights – whether in contexts of crisis or not - are, in fact, shared. Indeed, shared deathbed

visions are rare in the literature. Osis and Haraldsson mention only two or three, Barrett none at all, and neither source include shared visions of light. To this extent, the 'Common Core' study has already drawn attention to a highly interesting category of shared religious experience that has been hitherto underreported in the literature. It is to be hoped that more accounts may now be forthcoming, not least because of the possibilities of corroboration that such experiences afford.

Two more cases of shared experiences of unusual lights remain for analysis at the close of this paper. The first involves the by-now typical context in which a life is apparently in danger, but is unusual in that the sick person was not apparently present where the light was seen. The case occurred at Mansfield, Nottinghamshire in the early hours of October 18th, 1962 at 1.30 a.m. The subject's brother had called the evening prior to the experience and this visit had deeply concerned her. He had, she writes, "looked very, very ill & how he had managed to come at all I just do not know. Outside it was deep in snow with gale force winds. He asked me to do something for him which was almost impossible. He would take no refusal & as he was so ill I promised I would do all I could. That evening I could not settle & before going to bed [I] prayed for help." This prior situation of deep anxiety and concern was then followed by a dramatic experience:

At 1.30 a.m I was still awake & looked across to the mantle shelf to verify the time as my husband had to be up at 5 a.m for work. Instead of seeing the clock I saw a round white light but as the clock was luminous [I] thought it strange not to see the figures. I got out of bed & went towards the light & it vanished. I got back into bed & lay pondering. The room was in total darkness. I lay hoping it would come back & suddenly a tall white candle of light sprang up wavering at the top. I was so terrified that I slid out of bed & hid my face. When I got into bed again I woke my husband. He put out his hand to touch it & I said "Don't". We lay there almost petrified. I said to my husband, "Don't go to sleep. It may go." & suddenly It sank down & out, then I said "Let's wait & see if it comes back" and immediately It did so. Altogether it must have been with us about 1 hour & 20 mins.

The writer appears to have connected the presence of the unusual candle of light with her brother's illness because she immediately follows this description with the comment that "The next day I had three offers of help for my brother, who recovered his health." Altogether this is a most unusual and remarkably detailed account. The fact that the light disappears and reappears has been encountered before, as has the positive outcome of the episode, and it clearly resembles the other shared crisis light accounts in that the light appears within a context of extreme duress. But here the similarities end. The wavering shape of the light – compared to a candle's flame – has no parallel elsewhere in the archive, but is perhaps reminiscent in some ways of the 'corpse candle' tradition already discussed. The emotional response is also unusual: rather than produce feelings of peace and calm, the light terrifies both witnesses. Finally, it is of note that the duration of the experience is quite remarkable. Indeed, few of the experiences examined in the course of this entire study approach anything like the eighty minutes that this episode apparently occupied. The fear of both witnesses during this time can only be imagined, and we recall the writer's later recollection that "We lay there almost petrified" (2362).

A final account in this category also reveals similarities and differences with cases so far examined. As with the case in which the niece saw a light in a corner of the room where her aunt later gazed before dying, the case implies a shared experience but does not explicitly state it. The subject's account begins with the death of her son in November 1964. At this point, she writes, her four year-old daughter began to have conversations in bed with an unseen presence. When asked who or what she had been talking to, the daughter claimed that it was Jesus. The account continues:

Then one morning after she had been having a very lengthy conversation the night before, I casually asked her who she had been talking to. She said it was a pretty lady. I asked her to describe the lady and she did. She gave me a detailed description of the Virgin Mary. At this time my daughter was not yet five and had not had any religious instruction. After that her conversations stopped and I thought nothing more about it.

Then in Nov. '66 my mother died. A few weeks after her death I went into my daughters room and there was a dim light over her bed. It disappeared as I entered the room and I put it down to tired eyes. But that light was there again many times, until I moved my daughter into another room with her younger sister.

This account is included in the 'shared' category because there is a clear implication that the presences the daughter talked to were in some sense identical with the dim light the mother saw. The proximity of the light to the daughter's bed suggests this, but it is clear that at no point did mother and daughter 'view' the light simultaneously. In other respects, however, it bears close comparison with the other cases already examined in this category. There is at least an implication that the deaths of the writer's son and mother were associated with the light's arrival. The recurrence or return of the light on more than one occasion is also a by-now familiar feature. Also noteworthy is the positive, benign effect of the light, particularly on the daughter, for at the end of her account, the writer adds:

My daughter is now eleven and is a perfectly normal child, except that she has never been really ill in her life. She has had the normal child ailments like measles and chicken-pox, but even they didn't get her down like they do other children. As far as I or my husband can remember she has not even had a cold (2537).

Does the writer mean to suggest here that the daughter's remarkable health is in some sense the result of the earlier presences and/or light? Again, this is at least implied, and the detail is particularly poignant in view of the tragic circumstances that signalled the beginning of this curious series of conversations and sightings.

Conclusions

The accounts in the RERC archive containing shared experiences of unusual light, whilst few in number, are fascinating in detail and quality. However, whilst ten accounts in total might seem to represent a disappointingly small number, it is highly probable that a researcher looking for shared accounts of different types – or shared accounts per se – would be rewarded with enough unusual experiences to permit a very interesting and original study. There is at least the potential here for a future archive-driven research project of immense significance. This being said, however, even from the small number of accounts that the current study has examined we can conclude a number of important things.

Firstly, it has become clear that the shared light accounts in the archive bear clear resemblances to shared light accounts elsewhere, but that in a couple of cases there are accounts with unique features. What to make, for example, of the curious tale of two shadows with no light to cast them or the curious breathing in the spooky Michigan UFO case? As far as I am aware, these features are without parallel in the extant, relevant literature. Will comparable cases emerge in future UFOlogical investigations, or as a result of future research conducted within the archive?

Secondly – and of extreme importance to anybody interested in seeking a common core within the varieties of religious experience – these shared cases contain features that are comparable to other categories of light experience found within the archive. Whilst more detailed analysis of this contention stands outside of the scope of this paper, the fact that fully 50% of the shared experiences of light occurred at a time of crisis is the most obvious

finding in this regard. In fact, over 50% of the entire number of experiences of light in the entire archive occurred at a time of crisis. Other features that the shared accounts have in common with other, non-shared, archival accounts of light include the positive emotions created in experiences by their experiences and the positive fruits left by their experiences in the lives of experiencers. In these contexts we may recall, for example, the lady nursing her aunt who spoke of remarkable exhilaration, peace and well being at a time of deep anxiety and of the Belfast soldier's deepened interest in spiritual matters subsequent to his Falls Road encounter with the Blessed Virgin Mary.

However, there are significant contrasts between the 'shared' and 'non-shared' categories also, and these too are worthy of careful note. The shared accounts, for example, contain a significant number of expressions suggesting that negative, frightening emotions accompanied some experiences. The Michigan UFO case is terrifying virtually throughout. The nocturnal Mansfield candle shaped light also clearly petrified the respondent and her husband. And in the case of the shadows in the absence of light case, the dominant emotions engendered seem to have been negative. This makes at least some of the shared cases rather unusual, for most often within the archive lights reported as manifesting both externally and internally appear benign and typically create feelings of calm, love, peace, joy and comfort.

However, it should be kept in mind that despite a negative effect being reported in three cases, in the majority of shared accounts the feelings reported remain overwhelming positive in tone. In this way – and, as noted above, in other ways besides – the shared accounts represent a microcosm of the much larger number of episodes of unusual light to be found in the archive.

NOTES

(1) As an astronomer, Hynek was engaged in an official capacity by the US Air Force during its various attempts to conduct official investigations into a variety of unexplained aerial sightings during the 1950s and 1960s. Official projects undertaken during this time included Project Sign, Project Grudge and Project Blue Book. The 'swamp gas' hypothesis was proposed by Hynek as an explanation for some glowing objects reported as hovering close to the ground and was widely dismissed.

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