

GUEST EDITORIAL

Eben Alexander's Near-Death Experience: How an *Esquire* Article Distorted the Facts

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ABSTRACT: In July, 2013, journalist Luke Dittrich wrote an article in *Esquire* magazine critical of neurosurgeon Eben Alexander's 2012 book *Proof of Heaven*. Dittrich cited several malpractice lawsuits against Alexander, in one of which Alexander allegedly had altered medical records to cover his errors. Dittrich made this allegation his theme for critiquing the story of Alexander's NDE: that Alexander altered the facts of his story to make them more dramatic. In particular, Dittrich questioned the central premise of the book: that Alexander's experience was the result of a brain ailment but destroyed by meningitis. He contended that Alexander's hyperreal experience of the heavenly Gateway Realm with the beautiful girl on the butterfly wing and the knowledge he gained from The Core were all hallucinations resulting from a medically induced coma and that Alexander stood to gain financially by representing his experience as genuine. In this article, I critique Dittrich's article point by point and uncover a pattern of inaccuracy and misrepresentation of facts on Dittrich's part. I conclude that it was Dittrich's work, rather than Alexander's, that was erroneous.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience, Eben Alexander, media, journalistic integrity

The principles of journalistic professionalism and objectivity include the adherence to factuality; impartial, fair, and balanced treatment; and avoidance of bias and partisanship. In reporting accurate information to the public, the duty of reporters and journalists is to ensure that the information is correct (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). Accurate information critical to a report needs to be verified and confirmed by multiple sources. Whenever possible, an author should

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pursue all possible avenues of confirmation; any contradictory or conflicting information should be disclosed to provide a balanced account. When reporting a controversial issue—for example, the meaning and cause of near-death experiences (NDEs)—authors should provide at least mention, if not adequate treatment, of opposing viewpoints.

Unfortunately, in news reports, popular commentaries, and professional publications, authors have frequently presented NDEs solely from the viewpoint that NDEs are merely hallucinations caused by brain dysfunction (Blackmore, 1993; Woerlee, 2005) or are confabulations developed either deliberately through fraud or embellishment or unconsciously through “confirmation bias”—recalling or interpreting information only that confirms one’s preexisting beliefs. The conclusion is that these experiences are not real and readers should not consider them to be any indication of transcendent realms or the afterlife. The authors of these one-sided articles generally do not look at all of the evidence from NDE research and rarely consider alternative explanations in any depth—despite the availability of publications by careful scholars who have demonstrated the inadequacy of attempts to explain all aspects of NDEs through physical processes (Rivas et al., 2016). Luke Dittrich’s article in *Esquire* magazine is a prime example of how such unbalanced commentaries perpetuate misinformation to the public about what are, in fact, profound life-altering subjective experiences.

Dittrich is an award-winning writer and a contributing editor at *Esquire* magazine. His long article “The Prophet” appeared in the July 2, 2013, issue of *Esquire*. In it, Dittrich (2013) tried to show that Eben Alexander’s account of his NDE (Alexander, 2012a) had numerous embellishments and fabrications, pointing out three critical details of the story with allegedly serious factual errors. Dittrich also pointed to Alexander’s apparent record as a neurosurgeon with numerous malpractice lawsuits—including a case of altering a patient’s records allegedly to cover a medical error—and being forced out of multiple jobs in neurosurgery.

Dittrich further reported that even His Holiness the Dalai Lama had seen through Alexander’s “extraordinary claims” and all but declared him a liar (Dittrich, 2013, p. 127). So Dittrich concluded that Alexander’s book *Proof of Heaven*—featuring a beautiful girl on a butterfly wing—was fabricated out of hallucinations produced by a drug-induced coma to enable Alexander to elevate himself from a failed neurosurgeon to the new “Prophet of Heaven.”

Dittrich’s article presented a well-crafted case, one that David

Granger, *Esquire's* Editor-in-Chief, called “great journalism” in a promotional ad on the *Esquire* web site when the article was published. However, on closer examination, I found that the alleged facts in the article do not stand up to scrutiny. In this article, I present these alleged facts point by point and, in each case, present evidence that contradicts them. In particular, it appears that Dittrich engaged in his own fabrication by taking statements by one of Alexander’s physicians out of context to develop his central thesis of the drug-induced coma. Rather than “great journalism,” Dittrich’s article appears to be quite the opposite.

Background of This Article

Shortly after the *Esquire* article appeared, I called several sources cited by Dittrich for confirmation. On August 12, 2013, I published an online version of the present article on the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) web site (Mays, 2013) and revised it with minor changes on August 14. During this time, I called Laura Potter, Alexander’s admitting physician and a key witness in this case, several times for confirmation of her written statement contradicting Dittrich’s interpretation of her statements to him, but she did not respond to my calls. On August 15, at Potter’s request, as communicated by a Lynchburg General Hospital spokesperson, I revised the article to remove her written statement.

During August 14 and 15, summaries of several points in my article appeared in several online blogs and were mentioned in various online discussion forums—for example, on the Skeptiko.com forum moderated by Alex Tsakiris (2013, August 14). In this forum, Tsakiris wrote that he had sent an email to Matt Goulet, assistant to Granger, asking whether Granger or Dittrich had responded to the claims in my article, particularly Potter’s written statement. Also on August 14, Tsakiris “pinged” Dittrich’s Twitter account about the article, asking for an interview. Tsakiris also extended an invitation to interview me on Skeptiko (Tsakiris, 2013, August 27). On August 15, Tsakiris announced on the forum that Dittrich had responded and had declined to be interviewed.

After four years, I am motivated to publish a revision of my article for three reasons. First, the distorted facts and conclusions from Dittrich’s article continue to be repeated, including in scholarly analyses of NDEs (for example, Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2016, p. 178). Second, it is important to include Potter’s verbatim statement for the record,

despite her request four years ago to the contrary. Finally, additional information surrounding Alexander's NDE warrants inclusion in the article.

This article will be most meaningful to readers familiar with Alexander's NDE. For those unfamiliar, I recommend first reading the final sections of this article, beginning with "A Genuine Near-Death Experience," as well as Susan Varhely's 2012 book review in this *Journal*.

Three Alleged Flaws in Alexander's Story and Response

Dittrich pointed out three key places in Alexander's (2012a) account of his experience that failed confirmation when Dittrich checked them: a rainbow heralding Alexander's return that could not have been seen, a shout for help noted by everyone present that could not have been uttered, and, most damning of all, the assertion of a hyperreal experience of incredible beauty, love, and wisdom that could not have occurred in a medically induced coma. The first two flaws could perhaps be excused by the pressure to produce a dramatic story, one that would generate interest and sell well, taking, as Alexander admitted, some "artistic license" (Dittrich, 2013, p. 126). Indeed, the question whether Alexander's relatives saw a rainbow has bearing only on Alexander's possible use of embellishment, not on his experience in coma.

But the last flaw would be fatal, because Alexander's (2012a) central assertion was that his experience occurred during a weeklong coma brought on by severe bacterial meningitis. That central assertion was directly contradicted by Emergency Room (ER) physician Potter's statement that Alexander's state would be considered "conscious but delirious." Alexander's medical records are all confidential. Even with Alexander's permission, his doctors refused to be interviewed, except for Potter. So all Dittrich had to go on were Potter's statements and Alexander's assertions. Dittrich felt that Alexander's alleged history of altering medical records to achieve a desired result called into question everything he would assert about his medical condition. Indeed, as we shall see, Potter's statements appeared pretty damning, so it is important to understand fully the nature of Alexander's coma.

In response to Dittrich's exposé, Alexander issued the following statement:

I wrote a truthful account of my experiences in *Proof of Heaven* and have acknowledged in the book both my professional and personal accomplishments and my setbacks. I stand by every word in this book and have made its message the purpose of my life. *Esquire's* cynical article distorts the facts of my 25-year career as a neurosurgeon and is a textbook example of how unsupported assertions and cherry-picked information can be assembled at the expense of the truth (quoted in Bercovici, 2013, July 2).

The Rainbow That Allegedly Could Not Have Been Witnessed

On Sunday morning, November 16, 2008, after several days of relentless rain, the rain stopped. Alexander was coming out of his coma. His sister, Phyllis, and their 87-year-old mother, Betty, were on their way into the hospital, with Betty in a wheelchair, when they saw a “perfect rainbow” toward the distant peaks. Dittrich commented, “It was as though heaven itself was cheering Alexander’s return.”

Only, according to Dittrich (2013), that phenomenon could not have happened. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration meteorologist Dave Wert checked the weather records for the 16th: It was a clear day. Could there have been a rainbow the morning of the 16th? “No,” Wert said (2013, p. 125).

Dittrich (2013) left the reader to conclude that this account was an open-and-shut case of embellishment, part of a pattern of behavior Dittrich had developed about Alexander in the article. Of course, the rainbow was not observed by Alexander himself, because he was just coming out of coma. Either Alexander was told this purported fact by Phyllis or he just made it up to give a nice twist to the story.

Dittrich apparently did not feel the need to investigate further. He considered the meteorologist’s pronouncement definitive: No rainbow would have been possible on that morning. Therefore, it must have been a fabrication by Alexander.

In fact, if Dittrich had interviewed Phyllis, as I have done, she would have told him: She and her mother saw a rainbow as they were entering the hospital about 1:00 p.m. It was to the right of the entrance—north of the hospital—where there are mountains. They commented on the rainbow, and Betty noted, “It’s a perfect rainbow!” When they turned the corner into Alexander’s Intensive Care Unit (ICU) room a few moments later, he was sitting up in bed. Later that day, Phyllis emailed friends back in Boston, telling them about Alexander’s mi-

raculous recovery—and about the rainbow she and her mother had witnessed. She offered to show me the email (P. Alexander, personal communication, August 5, 2013).

It is difficult to reconcile a two-person eyewitness account with contemporaneous corroborative documentation and an expert meteorologist's naysaying pronouncement. Perhaps Phyllis and her mother were mistaken. "No," Phyllis replied, "we both saw it. If I'd known I'd be 'on trial' about it later, I would have taken a picture of it" (P. Alexander, personal communication, August 5, 2013).

An ordinary rainbow—one following a rainstorm—would be very unusual on an apparently clear day at 1:00 p.m. in November. However, there are many ways for a rainbow to occur. In any case, Phyllis and Betty clearly saw a rainbow on that Sunday morning when Alexander came out of coma. Phyllis confirmed to me that she told him about it later. He did not fabricate the story or embellish the details, as Dittrich (2013) implied he had.

Fact checking in this case would have been easy; Phyllis was only one phone call away, as she was when I phoned her on August 5, 2013. Considering that Dittrich (2013) was calling into question a man's integrity and honesty, he should have investigated his allegation further, corroborating with relevant sources to get to the bottom of the seeming contradiction.

The Shout for Help That Allegedly Could Not Have Been Uttered

In one of the book's most dramatic scenes, Alexander described how he had come to learn that physician Potter prepared to move him from the ER to the ICU (2012a, p. 24). In those final moments, after two straight hours of struggle—thrashing and guttural groans and wails—Alexander grew quiet and then shouted out, for everyone present to hear, "God, help me!" The doctors, nurses, his wife Holley, and his neighbor Michael Sullivan, an Episcopal rector, rushed to his stretcher, but Alexander remained completely unresponsive.

Dramatic—but, according to Dittrich, it could not have happened. He reported that Potter had no recollection of the incident, although she did remember that she intubated Alexander more than an hour before his departure from the ER. Could he have shouted anything, let alone something clearly heard, asked Dittrich. He quoted Potter as replying, "No" (p. 126).

For Dittrich, this was another clearly open-and-shut case of embellishment or fabrication. Of course, at the time Alexander was in a

coma, so either he was told this purported fact by Holley or someone else or he just made it up to give another dramatic, emotional twist to the story.

Again, Dittrich appears not to have investigated further. The facts Potter gave seemed crystal clear and made complete sense: The intubation would almost certainly have been done in the ER, and Alexander's status would have been stabilized before transfer to the ICU. Based on the fact that a person cannot vocalize while intubated, Dittrich left the reader to conclude that the shout must have been another fabrication by Alexander.

In fact, if Dittrich had asked Holley, she would have confirmed the story: Indeed, at some time in the ER, Alexander *had* shouted out "God, help me!" Holley heard him from just outside the curtain, and everyone present, including Holley and Sullivan, had rushed to his side, but Alexander fell back unresponsive. Those present were given hope that he was recovering, but these hopes faded quickly.

I spoke with Holley Alexander on August 7, 2013. She said that this incident occurred about an hour or so after she had arrived in the ER with Eben. She told me,

It happened before they sedated him, while the doctors were trying to get vital signs and spinal fluid and all that. I said to Michael [Sullivan], 'He spoke!' and Eben kept writhing. Potter might not have heard it. She was in and out, checking scans, spinal fluid, so it's very likely that she wasn't there.

And yes, this happened *before* Alexander was intubated, so his only embellishment was to fudge the timing of the incident, perhaps for dramatic effect—a trivial adjustment, or a minor error, as Alexander was reporting an incident that he did not recall but that others had much later reported to him.

During the many hours Dittrich spent talking to Alexander in his home, he could easily have asked Holley, who was present the entire time, about this incident. He did not. Perhaps Dittrich suspected collusion between Eben and Holley, so he would not have considered her account of the facts to be reliable. Still he could have talked to their neighbor and Episcopal rector Sullivan. Again, he did not (H. Alexander, personal communication, August 7, 2013).

Further investigation has now revealed that two of the three key flaws in Alexander's story have turned out to be trivial. But it is not trivial that Dittrich relied on these apparent inconsistencies to build a case that Alexander's story was a complete fabrication, a hallucination, a fantasy.

All it would have taken was a simple conversation with two of the

people identified in *Proof of Heaven* as witnesses to corroborate or refute Alexander's account. In both cases, Dittrich would have found complete corroboration of Alexander's portrayal of the rainbow and nearly complete corroboration of the shout in the ER.

The Hyperreal Experience That Allegedly Could Not Have Occurred in a Medically Induced Coma

Dittrich's interpretation of *Proof of Heaven* hinges most on the question of coma. Coma is a state of unconsciousness lasting more than six hours in which a person: cannot be awakened; fails to respond normally to painful stimuli, light, or sound; lacks a normal sleep-wake cycle; and does not initiate voluntary actions. In order to maintain consciousness, a person needs to have a perfectly functioning cerebral cortex and brainstem (Laureys & Tononi, 2009, p. 18).

According to his own account, Alexander was not conscious during any of his stay in the hospital: He lost consciousness at home on Monday around 8:00 a.m., shortly after shouting to his son, "Have a good day at school," and remained unconscious until he awoke the next Sunday morning around 9:00 a.m. (Alexander, 2012a, p. 16).

Alexander had developed a severe case of bacterial meningitis. In his book, Alexander (2012a) cited several measures indicated the seriousness of his condition: the very quick onset of his symptoms, persistent seizure (*status epilepticus*), the presence of *E. coli* bacteria in his cerebral spinal fluid (CSF), the high white blood cell count and high protein level in his CSF, the very low glucose level in his CSF, and the CT scans of his brain that showed diffuse edema, damage in all eight lobes of his cortex and, widespread blurring of the gray-white matter junction. In addition, several specific neurological exams showed severe alterations: abnormal posturing indicating damage to the cortex and thalamus, florid papilledema indicating elevated intracranial pressure, fixed pupils indicating brainstem damage, and no vestibulo-ocular reflex also indicating brainstem damage. Alexander's motor response declined further to "no motor response to noxious stimuli," indicating widespread cortical and brainstem damage.

Yes, Alexander's medical records remain confidential. But Alexander (2012b) published these results in an article, "My Experience in Coma," in the quarterly newsletter of the American Association of Neurological Surgeons and also released these results for a podcast interview on Skeptiko.com (Tsakiris, 2012). Dittrich surely had access to both sources.

The most important indicator of Alexander's coma state was his Glasgow Coma Scale (GCS; Alexander, 2012a, p. 25). GCS scores range from 15 (fully conscious) to 3 (deep coma). A score of 8—Alexander's reported score upon hospital admission—is below the midpoint and indicates “severe brain injury” and a state of coma (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016).

But Dittrich (2013) focused on the fact that Alexander was groaning and flailing about and had to be placed in a chemically induced coma. Dittrich recounted how Potter described it:

“We couldn't work with Eben at all, we couldn't get vital signs, he just was not able to comply. So I had to make the decision to just place him in a *chemically induced coma* [emphasis added]. Really for his own safety, until we could treat him. And so I did. . . . I put him to sleep, if you will, and put him on life support.”

After Alexander was taken from the ER to the ICU, Potter says, the doctors there administered anesthetics that kept him in the coma. The next day, she went to visit him. “And of course he was still in an *induced coma*” [emphasis added], she says. “On ventilator support. They tried to let him wake up and see what he would do, but he was in exactly the same agitated state. Even if they tried to ease up, a little bit even, on the sedation. In fact, for days, every time they would try to wean his sedation—just thrashing, trying to scream, and grabbing at his tube.” (p. 125)

On the basis of these statements, Dittrich concluded that Alexander's coma was induced and maintained *solely* by anesthetics:

In *Proof of Heaven*, Alexander writes that he spent seven days in “a coma caused by a rare case of *E. coli* bacterial meningitis.” *There is no indication in the book that it was Laura Potter, and not bacterial meningitis, that induced his coma, or that the physicians in the ICU maintained his coma in the days that followed through the use of anesthetics* [emphasis added]. (p. 125)

This point goes to the heart of Alexander's story, because according to Alexander, he did not have a working brain, and, therefore, his memories could not have been hallucinations. Dittrich continued:

[Alexander] notes that by conventional scientific understanding, “if you don't have a working brain, you can't be conscious,” and a key point of his argument for the reality of the realms he claims to have visited is that *his memories could not have been hallucinations, since he didn't possess a brain capable of creating even a hallucinatory conscious experience* [emphasis added]. (pp. 125–126)

Dittrich then posed the key question, whether Alexander was conscious during his stay in the hospital:

I ask Potter whether the manic, agitated state that Alexander exhibited whenever they weaned him off his anesthetics during his first days of coma *would meet her definition of conscious*.

“Yes,” she says. “Conscious but delirious” [emphasis added]. (p. 126)

For Dittrich (2013), Potter’s statement is conclusive proof that Alexander was conscious, although severely sick, and was maintained in a medically induced coma solely by administration of anesthetics. *And Alexander failed to disclose that key fact in his book.*

Dittrich again left the reader to conclude that Alexander had covered up the real reason for his coma—the administration of the sedative diazepam to control his thrashing movements, initially so the lumbar puncture could be performed in the ER and later to control the thrashing in the ICU. The administration of the sedative would account for Alexander’s experiences of the “heavenly realms” as merely drug-induced hallucinations. Dittrich led the reader to conclude that the entire account in *Proof of Heaven* was part of a pattern of deception Alexander allegedly showed throughout his medical career.

Once again, Dittrich apparently did not feel the need to investigate further. There was no need for corroboration, no need to check with other experts about all the indications that Alexander’s brain was severely damaged by the bacterial infection. After all, the experts were not there in the ER and the ICU. And the other doctors who *were* involved with Alexander’s case refused to be interviewed. The one doctor who *was* present was certainly sufficient. And the other doctors would undoubtedly corroborate Potter’s assessment.

Dittrich also apparently did not feel the need to consider the overwhelming evidence for severe meningitis. The data all came directly from Alexander, who could easily have exaggerated, embellished, or even fabricated them—a very good reason for Alexander to insist that his medical records be kept confidential.

Apparently, neither Dittrich nor his editors were at all concerned that the very heart of their portrayal of Alexander as a fraud was based on the sole assessment of one doctor. Apparently, they were not concerned that Dittrich might have misheard Potter or possibly misinterpreted what she had told him.

Members of the Alexander family circle told me that Potter expressed to them deep concern when the *Esquire* article first appeared and she was subsequently contacted by the press. She was alarmed about the way her remarks had been twisted in the *Esquire* article. She told them that Dittrich had not rechecked with her and had not shown her how he was going to quote her.

Through Lynchburg General Hospital, Potter issued the following statement to the Associated Press and to Simon & Schuster, shortly after the *Esquire* article appeared. The statement was never published by the Associated Press (personal communications, P. Alexander, August 5, 2013; Priscilla Painton of Simon & Schuster, August 15, 2013):

I am saddened by and gravely disappointed by the article recently published in *Esquire*. The content attributed to me is both out of context and does not accurately portray the events around Dr. Eben Alexander's hospitalization. I felt my side of the story was misrepresented by the reporter. I believe Dr. Alexander has made every attempt to be factual in his accounting of events.—Dr. Laura Potter

So, according to Potter's statement, Dittrich's portrayal of the events regarding Alexander's illness is inaccurate. Dittrich took Potter's statements out of context, twisted them, and misrepresented them. Furthermore, Potter *affirmed* that Alexander's account of the medical facts of his case was accurate.

The facts regarding Alexander's coma state are pretty clear. Had Dittrich read *Proof of Heaven* with any care, he would have found a definitive statement of the facts about Alexander's coma in Appendix A, from infectious disease specialist Scott Wade, the lead physician on Alexander's case:

Dr. Alexander had become ill quickly with flu-like symptoms, back pain, and a headache. He was promptly transported to the Emergency Room, where he had a CT scan of his head and then a lumbar puncture with spinal fluid suggesting a gram-negative meningitis. He was immediately begun on intravenous antibiotics targeting that and placed on a ventilator machine *because of his critical condition and coma* [emphasis added]. . . . Despite prompt and aggressive antibiotic treatment for his *E. coli* meningitis as well as continued care in the medical intensive care unit, he *remained in a coma six days* [emphasis added] and hope for a quick recovery faded (mortality over 97 percent). (Alexander, 2012a, p. 183)

Apparently, Dittrich did not read this part of *Proof of Heaven*. Wade stated clearly that Alexander was in a coma in the ER and that he remained in a coma for six days. Had the coma been due to administering sedatives, Alexander would not have been assessed with severe brain injury (GCS 8) on admission, prior to the administration of sedatives. Wade's clear implication was that Alexander's presenting and prolonged coma and critical condition were the result of the meningitis rather than any treatment the medical team had administered.

So the heart of Dittrich's (2013) portrayal of Alexander's condition

is a fabrication, based on a misrepresentation of Potter's statements to him. In light of Dittrich's inaccurate portrayal, it would be instructive to review the full recording of the interview—assuming that he recorded his interviews with Potter—to understand the full context in which Dittrich asked Potter whether Alexander's manic, agitated state during his first days of coma could be considered conscious and she responded, "Yes, conscious but delirious." Dittrich may have led Potter into making this and other statements.

In the face of the other doctors' refusal to be interviewed, Dittrich could have confirmed the doctors' assessment of Alexander's case with other witnesses, for example, Holley or Holley's friend Sylvia White. Had he checked with White, she would have told him (personal communication, August 5, 2013):

I sat with [Alexander's] wife Holley [on Sunday morning] as the doctor showed us the scans and when he told Holley to call her family. He told her that Eben could not survive and that, even if he did, he would be irreparably damaged; in fact, he would be in a vegetative state, one that would require ongoing care at a nursing home. Such observations reflected the ongoing meningitis-induced coma and the dismal neurological prognosis, not recommendations that would be made for a patient simply in a "drug-induced coma."

Dittrich (2013) also made no mention of having consulted with medical experts—who would have told him that the evidence from the available medical data from *Proof of Heaven* and the other sources cited earlier (Alexander, 2012b; Tsakiris, 2012) indicated coma caused by severe damage to the cortex and brainstem that likely would result in death.

Alexander (2012a) reported that his body had exhibited *status epilepticus*, or persistent seizures. About an hour after Alexander arrived at the ER, Potter administered 15 milligrams of diazepam (Alexander, 2012a, p. 18) to calm Alexander down and later more sedatives to enable a lumbar puncture (Alexander, 2012a, p. 21). The sedatives calmed the neural activity and, thereby, reduced or eliminated the thrashing. It is likely that at some later time, a "tonic phase" of seizure started again with the reflexive verbal outburst of "God, help me!" It is possible that Alexander was briefly in a semi-conscious, confusional state at this point, which would explain the clarity of his utterance, but he has reported having no memory of saying it.

Taking into account all of the above evidence, a more accurate accounting of events, including the nature of the coma, is as follows. Alexander's coma and seizures were brought on by the onslaught of

the bacterial meningitis infection that spread very rapidly through his cerebral spinal fluid. The bacteria attacked the entire outer surface of his brain including the neocortex, the limbic system including the hippocampus, as well as the brainstem. This attack brought on Alexander's subjective experience of loss of memory, language, identity, and consciousness. The attack also induced wild neuronal fluctuations in his cortex and other regions, which resulted in the persistent seizures. Alexander was in a meningitis-induced coma hours before the sedatives were administered. The sedatives were administered to control the seizures.

Contrary to Dittrich's assertion, Alexander *did* disclose the use of sedatives in a "chemically induced coma." Alexander reported that even after about four days of treatment when the sedating medications were stopped, he remained in a meningitis-induced coma:

"At times, early in the week, I would move. My body would thrash around wildly [emphasis added]. A nurse would rub my head and give me more sedation [emphasis added], and eventually I'd become quiet again . . . By the end of the week these occasional bursts of motor activity had all but ceased. I needed no more sedation [emphasis added], because movement—even the dead, automatic kind initiated by the most primitive reflex loops of my lower brainstem and spinal cord—had dwindled almost to nil." (Alexander, 2012a, p. 92)

One has to wonder how carefully Dittrich read *Proof of Heaven* to be able to say,

There is no indication in the book that it was Laura Potter, and not bacterial meningitis, that induced his coma [cf. pp. 18 & 21], or that the physicians in the ICU maintained his coma in the days that followed through the use of anesthetics [cf. p. 92]. (p. 125)

Dittrich clearly misunderstood that there were *two simultaneous causes* of Alexander's coma. Alexander's coma was not caused *solely* by the administration of the sedatives. The challenge is to tease out the effects of the meningitis versus the effects of the sedatives. Alexander was in a coma when he *arrived* in the ER and had continuous "tonic-clonic" seizures (*status epilepticus*), the type of seizure that causes unconsciousness and "tonic phase" muscle contractions, thrashing and moaning, followed by "clonic phase" convulsions and violent shaking. Potter and Wade diagnosed the cause of the seizures to be an aggressive gram-negative bacterial meningitis. In order to treat Alexander, they had to administer diazepam sedatives to control the seizures. Thus, the primary cause of Alexander's coma was the bacterial men-

ingitis infection, and the secondary cause was the sedatives administered to suppress the seizure symptoms.

Finally, Dittrich may have assumed that the sedative itself caused Alexander's vivid subjective experiences. Diazepam—also known as Valium—is a sedative used to *counteract* the crisis effects of hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD, phencyclidine (PCP), and marijuana (Schilling McCann, 2002)—certainly not to *exacerbate* symptoms of these latter drugs.

Summary

With this analysis, all three key flaws in Alexander's story have turned out to be either trivial or totally false. And Dittrich relied especially on the last alleged flaw to build a case that Alexander's story was a complete fabrication and his heavenly experience a hallucination or a fantasy.

All it would have taken was a simple conversation with two or three of the people identified in *Proof of Heaven* as witnesses—who were available to be interviewed—to corroborate or definitively refute Alexander's account. In this last case, Dittrich's argument rested solely on Potter's assessment. Yet had he asked her, Potter would have confirmed the accuracy of Alexander's story. Likewise, Holley Alexander, Michael Sullivan, Phyllis Alexander, and Sylvia White would have confirmed the accuracy of the story in *Proof of Heaven*.

Coda: The Dalai Lama Allegedly Pronounces Eben Alexander Unreliable and a Liar

Applying his excellent journalistic skills, Dittrich saved the best challenges to Alexander's character and veracity for the end of his article—from the Dalai Lama, no less, a spiritual leader held in high esteem throughout the world. So important were these pronouncements that the *Esquire* editors emblazoned them in an all-caps pull quote early in the article:

THE DALAI LAMA WAGS A FINGER AT ALEXANDER. WHEN A MAN MAKES EXTRAORDINARY CLAIMS, HE SAYS, A "THOROUGH INVESTIGATION" IS REQUIRED, TO ENSURE THAT PERSON IS "RELIABLE," HAS "NO REASON TO LIE." (p. 93)

The quote might just as well have said:

THE DALAI LAMA INVITES EBEN ALEXANDER TO SPEAK AT HIS COLLEGE'S CONVOCATION IN ORDER TO PRONOUNCE HIM UNRELIABLE AND A LIAR.

On May 10, 2013, His Holiness invited two distinguished scholars to speak at a symposium on "Life and After Life" as part of the Buddhist Maitripa College convocation in Portland, Oregon (Dalai Lama, 2013). Alexander spoke briefly about his NDE and how his view of past and future lives and the mind's potential had been transformed by it. Dr. José Cabezon, a Buddhist scholar, then spoke from an academic perspective about reincarnation. His Holiness then commented, speaking mostly in English but occasionally reverting to Tibetan and having a translator translate into English.

His Holiness first commented on Cabezon's talk. Then, at the 44:25-minute point in the video, he turned to address Alexander. Here Dittrich picked up the story:

[45:50] His Holiness explained that phenomena are categorized into "evident phenomena" that can be studied by direct observation, "hidden phenomena" that can be inferred based on observed phenomena, and then the third category is "extremely hidden phenomena" which can be accessed only through our own first-person experience or the first-person testimony of someone else.

[46:54] "Now for example," the Dalai Lama says, "his sort of experience." He points to Alexander. "For him, it's something reality. Real. But those people who never sort of experienced that, still, his mind is a little bit sort of . . ." He taps his fingers against the side of his head. "Different!" he says . . .

[47:46] "For that also, we must investigate," the Dalai Lama says. "Through investigation we must get sure that person is truly reliable." He wags a finger in Alexander's direction. *When a man makes extraordinary claims, a "thorough investigation" is required, to ensure "that person reliable, never telling lie," and has "no reason to lie"* [emphasis added]. (p. 127)

For Dittrich, the implication here was very clear: The Dalai Lama has caught Alexander in the lies that are now all too clear in his book.

However, my examination of this video revealed a very different tone and implication from the Dalai Lama. The first words His Holiness addressed to Alexander were:

[44:25, DL gestures to EA] As for your own, as *your explanation, on the basis of your own sort of experience, quite sort of, ah, amazing* [emphasis added].

For me, the Dalai Lama's connotation was clearly positive, not indicating doubt or aspersion but, rather, implying that Alexander's account was impressive and thought provoking.

His Holiness later proceeded to talk about dealing with "extremely hidden phenomena":

[46:54, DL gestures to EA] Now for example, his own sort of experience: For him it's something real. But those people who never sort of experienced that, still, his mind is a little bit sort of different [laughs]. It's possible like that. [Translator] So when we touch upon the third category of phenomena which is really extremely hidden and obscure, then, for the time being, for the other people—there's no real access, direct or inferential, so the only method that is left is to really rely on the testimony of the first-person experience of the person himself or herself.

Here, I believe His Holiness is referring to a phenomenon well known in transpersonal psychology: People who have not had direct experience with transcendent states of consciousness typically have difficulty relating to such experiences. As philosopher Ken Wilber (2000) has expressed it, those inexperienced with transcendent states are prone to the "pre/trans fallacy," that is, considering trans-rational states, such as those involved in NDEs, as pre-rational states, such as psychosis. Thus, to non-NDErs, the minds of NDErs may indeed be considered "a little bit sort of different" (Jan Holden, personal communication, December 18, 2016).

[47:46] [DL] And for that also you see, we must investigate. Through investigation we must get sure that person is truly reliable and his experience is something not just illusion of these things. Through then thorough investigation, that person is reliable, never telling lie—and *in this particular case, this is no reason to tell lie. Therefore,* [Translator:] *so then, one can take the testimony to be credible* [emphasis added]. [Translator:] So the point I'm trying to make is that with respect to science and its scope for discovering knowledge, we need to make a distinction about the fact that there might be certain types of phenomena, which are beyond the scope of scientific inquiry.

Dittrich apparently missed or ignored the highlighted phrases. In particular, Dittrich ended his account of the Dalai Lama's statement with "thorough investigation, that person is reliable, never telling lie" and, crucially, leaves out the rest of the statement, referring to Alexander: "and in this particular case, this is no reason to tell lie. Therefore, so then, one can take the testimony to be credible."

Let's compare how Dittrich interpreted this part versus what was actually said:

He wags a finger in Alexander's direction. *When a man makes extraordinary claims* [emphasis added], a "thorough investigation" is required, to ensure "that person reliable, *never telling lie,*" and has *"no reason to lie* [emphasis added]."

His Holiness did not wag his finger at Alexander; to me he clearly was emphasizing his point literally with a pointed finger—pointed at no one in particular, or perhaps figuratively at anyone investigating cases such as Alexander's. In addition, the Dalai Lama did not say "when a man makes extraordinary claims"—and Dittrich's careful wording did not indicate that he did, but, through journalistic craftiness, Dittrich inserted it to indicate that this wording was the Dalai Lama's implication. However, His Holiness was not referring, as the saying goes, to "extraordinary claims that require extraordinary proof" but, rather, to "extremely obscure phenomena" that call for a careful determination that the source person is reliable, never telling a lie, with no reason to lie.

For Dittrich, Alexander had every reason to lie about his experience: the financial gain, prestige, and adulation as the Prophet of Heaven (p. 91). For His Holiness, Alexander has no reason to lie, and, therefore, one can take Alexander's testimony to be credible. And His Holiness went on to show his acceptance of the validity of Alexander's experience:

[49:12] [DL] Among the scientists so far as I notice, the later part of the twentieth century, they [created] a sort of knowledge or field, they carried a sort of research about the brain—quite subtly. [49:30, pointing to EA] *At a more deeper level, there is still more mysterious things* [emphasis added].

Apparently, Dittrich missed this point also. Dittrich's summary of the proceedings after "has no reason to lie" was simply, "Then [the Dalai Lama] changes the subject, starts talking about a massive project to translate ancient Tibetan texts." Anyone who takes a few minutes to view the video directly can see that that is not actually what happened.

But Dittrich's main point had been made: The Dalai Lama did, or clearly *would* if he had the full picture, judge Alexander as the unreliable liar Dittrich had clearly shown him to be. Never mind that it doesn't even make sense that the Dalai Lama would invite a person to speak at the convocation of one of his colleges and then turn around and proclaim the man unreliable and a liar. The incongruity of such a picture certainly stretches one's credulity.

Apparently, Dittrich did not realize how far off his interpretation of the Dalai Lama's words were, evidently skipping over the phrase,

referring to Alexander, “and *in this particular case* this is no reason to tell lie,” which completely nullifies his interpretation. And apparently, Dittrich’s editors did not check how accurate his transcription and interpretation were. Again, apparently neither Dittrich nor his editors realized how incongruous their interpretation was in light of Alexander’s position as an honored guest at the Dalai Lama’s symposium—even emblazoning the clearly erroneous implications at the top of the *Esquire* article page.

It is instructive to see how such an erroneous interpretation can take on a life of its own, being repeated over and over as truth among ardent skeptics. Such canards then become the standard shorthand of skeptical dismissal. One can now expect Alexander’s NDE to be dismissed out of hand because “the Dalai Lama himself showed it was a total lie.”

John M. Fischer, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at University of California Riverside, recently cited Dittrich’s *Esquire* article, affirming its essential erroneous conclusion and including a two-page quotation of the Dalai Lama’s alleged pronouncement against Alexander (Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2016). Despite the fact that an earlier version of this critique of Dittrich’s article, and several similar critiques, have been available on the Internet since August, 2013 (Mays, 2013), Fischer concluded, “We agree with the Dalai Lama that, especially in the context where extraordinary claims are being made, the responsible thing to do is inquire critically” (Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin, 2016, p. 178). He and his co-author appear not to have taken their own advice.

It is quite ironic that a major thesis in Fischer’s and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin’s (2016) book, *Near-death experiences: Understanding visions of the afterlife*, was that NDEs are accepted so readily by NDErs and “believers” alike because of “confirmation bias,” that is, accepting only those facts that confirm one’s preexisting beliefs. Here it appears to me that Fischer himself succumbed to confirmation bias of his philosophical materialist worldview.

What is at stake here is a man’s reputation. What Dittrich and his editors did was to take the words of the Dalai Lama and twist and distort their meaning to the opposite of their true meaning, in order to drive home a conclusion—that Alexander is a fraud—a conclusion which I have shown here to be completely unwarranted and erroneous. Fischer uncritically accepted Dittrich’s account of Alexander, thereby compounding Dittrich’s errors by giving them the unqualified endorsement of a distinguished professor of philosophy.

Great Journalism or Journalistic Malpractice?

To *Esquire's* Editor-in-Chief, Dittrich's story represents great journalism. To me, the Dittrich article is shoddy and irresponsible journalism—*shoddy* because of Dittrich's and his *Esquire* editors' evident failures:

- to consider alternate explanations (rainbow),
- to check with the cited witnesses (Holley, Phyllis, and Betty Alexander and Sylvia White),
- to verify information with additional witnesses (Holley Alexander, Michael Sullivan, and others),
- to check with medical experts (on the likely cause of coma),
- to check again on crucial testimony of the sole cited witness (Laura Potter),
- to read the book carefully (Scott Wade's statement about Alexander's coma),
- to exercise care in asserting erroneous "facts" (use of drugs was not mentioned in the book),
- to exercise care in quoting and interpreting recorded remarks (Dalai Lama),
- to exercise common sense in interpreting the meaning of statements (Dalai Lama), and
- to respond when serious questions of accuracy were raised (interview request by Alex Tsakiris about Potter's statement).

And Dittrich's article was *irresponsible* because of the impact—the real harm—that the resulting distortions have caused. I am sure Dittrich and his editors felt completely justified based on what they felt was a solid case against Alexander. They probably also considered the negative effect that Dittrich's article and its conclusions would have on Alexander and others and similarly felt justified. In their minds, Alexander is a complete fraud and deserves to be exposed as such.

But at issue is whether Dittrich and his editors exercised *sufficient care* in building their case. In my opinion, they did not: The facts presented in the article were distorted or completely wrong, and the conclusions were totally unwarranted. And the result has been devastating to those people who know the facts and how utterly wrong they were portrayed in the article. They include all of the people I mentioned two paragraphs above, especially Potter whose statements were misrepresented and distorted by Dittrich to establish the central "fact" of his case. I strongly suspect that even His Holiness the Dalai Lama would be quite dismayed that his warm, supportive statements

to Alexander have been so cleverly distorted into the exact opposite of his meaning.

But the person most harmed is Alexander, whose reputation has been severely damaged on the basis of Dittrich's erroneous, distorted judgments. From now on, many people will associate Alexander with altering records, embellishment, fabrication, and delusion. Alexander's response seems all the more relevant now that the facts are a little clearer:

I wrote a truthful account of my experiences in Proof of Heaven and have acknowledged in the book both my professional and personal accomplishments and my setbacks. I stand by every word in this book and have made its message the purpose of my life. Esquire's cynical article distorts the facts of my 25-year career as a neurosurgeon and is a textbook example of how unsupported assertions and cherry-picked information can be assembled at the expense of the truth. [emphasis added]

Dittrich also insinuated or leveled a number of other allegations against Alexander. Alexander deserves to have his side of these cases heard as well. Alexander's 25-year neurosurgical career included over 4,000 surgeries. As Dittrich does not have a good track record with the truth with respect to the points discussed above, I find it impossible to trust his portrayal of the facts regarding Alexander's career.

The most serious of the cases Dittrich cited, that Alexander altered medical records in a case of wrong-level spine surgery, similarly distorted the truth, according to Alexander. The patient in question had excellent relief of his symptoms after Alexander's surgery, delaying Alexander's discovery that surgery had been performed at an unintended level. Alexander corrected the record to reflect the newly learned facts of the case and disclosed the surgical error to all parties after follow up revealed a genuine surgical benefit. After full investigation by three state medical boards and the American Board of Neurological Surgeons, Alexander continued to practice medicine without restriction, with his board certification intact (E. Alexander, personal communication, August 13, 2013).

From his investigative work, Dittrich presumably knows something about malpractice. In professions like medical and legal practice, malpractice involves negligence or incompetence on the part of a professional, entailing failure to exercise the skill, prudence, and diligence ordinarily expected of a member of the profession. The concept of malpractice is not ordinarily applied to journalistic practice. However, there are certain ethics and standards of behavior that apply, particu-

larly within a given publishing organization. According to the code of ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists (2014), journalists should, among other things, “take responsibility for the accuracy of their work. Verify information before releasing it. Never deliberately distort facts or context. Respond quickly to questions about accuracy, clarity and fairness.”

Although it is not clear what standards of ethics apply at *Esquire*, Dittrich appears to have violated the SPJ code of ethics on all of these points. In my opinion, Dittrich’s actions in investigating and writing the article and *Esquire*’s unabashed endorsement of it rise to the level of malpractice. Thus, it was Dittrich and *Esquire*, rather than Alexander, who perpetrated this professional error.

A Genuine Near-Death Experience

Another implication of Dittrich’s criticism is that Alexander’s NDE was not a “genuine” NDE. On the contrary, every indication from Alexander’s account is that it was genuine. An NDE is a profound psychological event a person has close to death or in a situation of physical or psychological crisis (Greyson, 2000). Because it includes transcendent or mystical elements, an NDE is a powerful event of consciousness, resulting in profound, lasting aftereffects.

Every NDE is unique but also reflects one or more common elements. Most NDEs have some subset of these elements: a feeling of peace and the absence of pain, a feeling of being separated from the physical body, a transition to a higher level (sometimes through a tunnel), being in a heavenly place of overwhelming beauty, meeting deceased loved ones, being in the presence of a Being of Light or some other spiritual being, having a life review, being transported to a place of pure Love and Wisdom, reaching a barrier or being told you must go back, and finally returning to the physical body.

Readers who are familiar with Alexander’s inner experience will recognize that he experienced a number of these elements—for example, a transition to a higher place, being in a heavenly place, meeting a deceased loved one, being transported to a place of pure Love and Wisdom, being in the presence of a high spiritual being, and being told that he must go back.

Psychiatrist and NDE expert Bruce Greyson assessed Alexander’s NDE at 29 on the NDE Scale (Greyson, 1983). This scale—the most widely used in NDE research—is based on 16 NDE elements and their intensity, scored 0 (absent), 1 (present in relatively mild form), or 2

(present in intense form). A total score of 7 or greater is considered to indicate a genuine NDE. Alexander's score falls within the top 2% of NDEs in terms of "depth" of experience as measured by the NDE Scale (Greyson, personal communication, January 24, 2017).

One aspect of Alexander's (2012a) experience that is not very common in NDEs was his loss of all memory, language, and identity. As mentioned earlier, I believe this outcome was the result of the initial simultaneous bacterial attack on specific areas of his brain—the hippocampus, Wernicke's language comprehension region, and the frontal lobes.

The initial stage of Alexander's (2012a) experience, the "Earthworm Eye View," is very uncommon. Alexander describes it as dark and blurry, like being submerged in a kind of transparent mud, with deep rhythmic pounding, a disgusting feces-like smell, and root-like structures around him. Grotesque faces would bubble up, screech and then disappear. In his talks after his book was published, Alexander has stated that he believes this level of consciousness was actually brain-based, "all that my feeble cortex could muster at the time."

Indeed, I would concur that the bacterial attack had probably not yet reached all areas of his cortex at this point, in particular the sulci or inward folds of the cortex. Still he was in a coma—unable to be awakened, and failing either to respond normally to painful stimuli or to initiate voluntary actions—with no memory, language, or sense of identity. His brain's minimal, intermittent electrical activity produced a minimal consciousness—a dull inward vision and rudimentary hearing and smell.

Then a white-gold rotating light appeared, accompanied by a rich, complex, "living" melody—the Spinning Melody. The light approached and revealed an opening—reminiscent of the "tunnel" other near-death experiencers (NDErs) have reported. Alexander experienced a very quick movement upward through the opening and found himself in a beautiful hyperreal scene—brilliant, vibrant, stunning—The Gateway. This part of Alexander's experience is very much like those of many other NDErs, a very real, heaven-like region—a verdant valley, exquisite flowering trees and bushes—and other people below. There was a divine, warm comforting breeze blowing through the valley.

He was floating on the wing of a butterfly; beside him sat a beautiful young woman. Alexander was very explicit about her appearance: deep blue eyes, high cheekbones, and long golden-brown hair. She looked at him with a deep love and told him telepathically that he was deeply loved forever. She told him he would learn many things but

eventually would have to go back. Again, these aspects of Alexander's experience are very typical, including the message that he would need to go back.

Above him in The Gateway were puffy, pink-white clouds and transparent orbs of shimmering beings, perhaps angels, singing in a glorious, palpable chant. When he had an inward question—Where is this place? Who am I?—the answers streamed into him from this chorus. The thoughts entered into him directly without words.

It has been my experience that when NDErs begin to recount their experience of the light-filled world that they visited, they are re-living the experience in the telling. They are re-experiencing the feelings of joy and love and the sense of “returning home” that they had in their NDEs. They frequently say that in the retelling, they have been able to “return to the Light,” if only briefly. I have observed Alexander convey these feelings through his voice and demeanor when he has retold his story.

Finally, Alexander entered an immense infinite void, completely dark but also brimming with a light from a brilliant Orb. He was now at The Core. The Orb was his companion, but within The Core, permeating throughout it, was the Source, God the Creator. Through the Orb, God disclosed many secrets and mysteries of existence to Alexander, knowledge that he received instantly and directly and stored without memorization—knowledge that will take him a lifetime to process. Again, this experience of the Infinite Void, of being in the presence of God and of receiving all knowledge and wisdom, is very typical of the “deeper” NDEs although they are only a small percentage of the total of NDE accounts.

The vast majority of NDErs comment on the hyperreal quality of their experience, saying it was “more real than real” and that “the *other* realm is reality; this *physical* realm is the dream and illusion.” They also frequently note—and researchers have confirmed (van Lommel et al., 2001, pp. 2041–2042)—that their memories of their NDEs are very vivid and do not fade, even after many years. Alexander's NDE has both of these features.

Alexander was then pulled back into the Earthworm Eye View. But at that point he had gained knowledge. And he found that if he thought of the Spinning Melody, he would be able to return to The Gateway Realm and then back to The Core. Each time though, inevitably, he would be sent back. He took this round-trip journey several times. Again, this is not at all uncommon for NDErs who have their experience while in coma over long periods of time. They find themselves out

of their bodies in their NDEs and then returning back to their physical bodies many times, but always remaining in coma, unable to move or communicate with the “outside” world.

Corroborating Time Anchors

Eventually, Alexander found that the Spinning Melody would no longer take him back to The Gateway. He sank back through walls of clouds and noticed a murmuring around him—a great throng of beings, people, who were praying for him. He later recognized two of the faces, Michael Sullivan and his wife Page, both of whom he later confirmed had been praying for him. Page had not been physically present in the hospital. (Alexander, 2012a, p. 103)

Toward the very end of his ordeal, he had descended back to the Earthworm Eye View realm, but at this point the faces that appeared were those he later remembered clearly. Looking back on it, he realized that these were the faces of Sylvia White, Holley and her sister Peggy, Scott Wade and another close friend of Holley’s, Susan Reintjes—five faces he recognized and a sixth that appeared later, that of his son Bond (Alexander, 2012a, pp. 108–110).

It happened that earlier, White had contacted Reintjes at her home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Reintjes is an intuitive, author of *Third Eye Open* (Reintjes, 2003), who regularly helps coma patients to heal by contacting them psychically. White summarized Alexander’s condition to Reintjes, who later reached out to Alexander in a meditative state, “descending” to a very deep level, until she was sure she had reached him. Reintjes told Alexander he was not ready to leave his body yet; his body would know what to do to come back:

Even though I had done this [coma communication] work before, I had never had to reach so far to contact a patient. For two hours I “talked” with Eben, reassuring him that he was not ready to leave his body but that he could not think his way out of the coma. I told him his body knew what to do to come back and to try to relax into the process. That night the nurses recorded the first signs of responsive behavior and the next night I sat with Eben again and repeated the messages, adding new encouragement and instruction. The following morning he opened his eyes and recognized his family surrounding him. He asked his wife, my close friend Holley, “Where’s Susan?” Holley told him that I had been helping him from Chapel Hill. But Eben was adamant that I had been in the room. . . .

As Eben returned from his coma he told his family he had “seen” them before awakening: “Of these the only one who was not actually

physically present at my bedside in those final hours was Susan. But in her way, she had been by my bedside, too, because that night, as the night before, she had sat down in her home in Chapel Hill and willed herself into my presence. My most this-worldly anchors in my experience, temporally speaking, were my interactions with Susan Reintjes when she contacted me on my fourth and fifth nights.” (Reintjes, 2013).

It is instructive to consider why Alexander had seen these specific six faces. They had all been praying for him the last night or the final morning of his coma. Of these, Susan Reintjes had not been physically present, having prayed and meditated from Chapel Hill, 120 miles from Lynchburg.

The sixth face—that of his son Bond—was particularly compelling. Alexander felt that this was the face of someone—he did not recognize whom—who needed him, someone who would never recover if Alexander left. If Alexander abandoned this person, the loss would be unbearable, a betrayal Alexander simply could not commit. In fact, that Sunday morning, Bond was pleading—desperately—for his dad to come back. And Alexander opened his eyes and began to look around (Alexander, 2012a, pp. 111–112).

This feature of Alexander’s NDE—the faces that were later recognized—would be called a veridical time anchor, an event or series of events that establishes a time correlation between elements perceived in the NDE and events that occurred in the earthly realm. This anchor consists of a series of faces later recognized by Alexander and recognized as praying for him, perceived in the time sequence they occurred in the earthly realm, particularly on the last night and final morning. It is all the more interesting that Reintjes, and also Page Sullivan, had not been physically present in the hospital. The correlation is further strengthened in that the last face, the last person, was felt to be particularly emotionally compelling to Alexander and was in fact the last person to be so emotionally involved in pleading for Alexander’s return.

The details of these “time anchors” should be studied further to verify them and because there are likely other interesting correlations present. At this time, the correlations of the three time anchors—particularly the recognition of people who were not physically present—strongly suggest that Alexander’s experience could not have been constructed in the moments after recovering consciousness, as some skeptics have suggested.

An Encounter with a Deceased Person Unknown to Alexander, with a Further Confirmation

Some NDEs include visions of deceased people who are not known to the person or who are not known at the time to be dead.

Alexander was puzzled by who the beautiful young woman was who accompanied him on the butterfly wing in The Gateway Realm. He did not recognize her, yet he remembered her features and her clothing perfectly. He frequently would describe her to Holley and their friends to the point that they all could almost see her in their mind's eye.

When Alexander was four months old, he had been given up for adoption. Only a year before his illness, he was finally reunited with his birth parents, who had later married after his adoption and had had other children. Their reunion was tinged with sadness because the youngest daughter Betsy—Alexander's biological sister—had died nine years earlier.

Alexander did not receive Betsy's photograph until four months after his coma, when his recovery was nearly complete. In the photograph, Betsy had long brown hair, deep blue eyes, and a smile that radiated love and kindness. She looked strangely, hauntingly familiar. The next morning, Alexander was reading an NDE account in one of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's books of a young girl's NDE. The girl confided to her father that she had met her brother in the NDE, only she did not have a brother. Tearfully the father told her that she did indeed have a brother who had died just three months before she was born, and they had never told her about him (Alexander, 2012a, p. 168).

Alexander then realized that, while the photograph of Betsy did not show the heavenly light of The Gateway around her and didn't show the beautiful powder blue and indigo dress he had seen her wearing on the butterfly wing, Betsy was indeed the young woman who had accompanied him on the butterfly wing in The Gateway Realm. There was no mistaking her (Alexander, 2012a, p. 169).

And others recognized Betsy as the beautiful young woman whom Alexander had met in his NDE—based on Alexander's earlier descriptions. Sylvia White wrote about and then elaborated on her experience (personal communication, August 5 and 10, 2013):

One of the most convincing aspects of Eben's account is his description of the young woman who accompanied him. He described her to me and his wife Holley in minute detail, down to her golden streaked hair, blue eyes, and dress. When I saw Betsy's photo, which rests on his bureau, I was stunned to realize that Betsy was the woman who had been described to us, right down to her high cheekbones.

Shortly after [Eben's] recovery, I visited Lynchburg. Holley took me into the bedroom and said, "You won't believe this." She showed me the framed photo of Betsy and told me that she was [Eben's] deceased sister. I immediately recognized her as the woman he had described to us, especially her hair, eyes, and smile. It seemed to me at the time that it was just not possible for a woman, who was that alive and loving as she grinned into the camera, to be dead. Everything about her convinced me that she was indeed the spirit guide for him during his coma and spiritual experience.

Such encounters with a deceased person unknown to the NDEr are fairly rare but they are striking and moving revelations to all who hear them. Alexander's experience has the additional confirmation that his own descriptions of the beautiful young woman were so vivid that they could be confirmed by those who similarly had never met Betsy. His descriptions *before* the photograph arrived also negate the objections some have proposed that Alexander had conflated the photograph and his recollections of a young woman or that his memory was merely a vague *déjà vu*.

Conclusion

Some critics might argue that one cannot come to a definitive conclusion about Alexander's case because his medical records remain confidential and his doctors—with the exception of Potter—have refused to be interviewed, even though Alexander had given permission. Given how Dittrich distorted Potter's statements, that was probably a correct decision. Nevertheless, a scholarly analysis of Alexander's medical case and NDE is warranted and hopefully will be undertaken.

In the meantime, the key evidence I have presented in this paper supports Alexander's account of his experience. This evidence includes: (a) the statement by lead doctor Scott Wade of the diagnosis of gram-negative *E. coli* meningitis and a six-day-long period of coma; (b) the supporting medical data published by Alexander in *AANS Neurosurgery*; (c) the statement by Potter affirming the accuracy of Alexander's account of the medical facts of his case; (d) the prognosis that Wade gave to Alexander's wife on the morning of Alexander's recovery, of either death or a persistent vegetative state; (e) Alexander's miraculous recovery to complete health with no neurological aftereffects; and (f) the validation that Alexander's experience was a genuine NDE with verified "time anchors" to events in the physical realm.

On the other side of the ledger is first Dittrich's report of a statement by Potter that Alexander was merely in a medically induced coma,

“conscious but delirious.” Potter immediately disputed this characterization in a statement to the press as inaccurate, taken out of context and a misrepresentation of her account of Alexander’s condition. Second is Dittrich’s clever manipulation of the Dalai Lama’s words to imply what most observers would conclude is the opposite of His Holiness’s characterization of Alexander’s experience.

In a controversial subject, definitive conclusions are rarely attained to everyone’s satisfaction. To my mind, Eben Alexander’s *Proof of Heaven* turns out to be quite the opposite of what Luke Dittrich portrayed or implied—namely, a story concocted out of the hallucinations of a sick brain coming periodically out of sedation and embellished with fanciful stories of rainbows and dramatic shouts for help. Rather, *Proof of Heaven* turns out to be an honestly portrayed true story of a dangerously close brush with death, a genuine near-death experience of heavenly revelation and a miraculous physical healing. *Proof of Heaven* is, most importantly, a story of love—of a love that could reach across dimensions to unite a sister and brother who had never met, and of the bond of love between a father and son that brought Alexander back from death’s door.

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