

At the Churches

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Encounters with death explored in support meetings



"I Saw the Light" is a popular hymn, and for many people, the words serve as a cliché for having the truth — religious or otherwise — hit them on

the head. But the phrase has vivid meaning for those at the **International Association of Near-Death Studies**.

People from all over the area attend monthly IANDS meetings at the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Lab near Columbia. Many of those present have literally seen the light, through a near-death experience, and have come to share their experience with others.

A near-death experience, or NDE, is when someone who has come close to death remembers something extraordinary happening during the moments when life hung in the balance. No two NDEs are identical, but when stories are compared, certain patterns emerge.

An NDE often includes the sense that the "self" has left the body and is hovering overhead, the experience of intense emotions ranging from bliss to sheer terror, an encounter with vibrant light, a meeting with deceased loved ones or sacred beings, and reaching a boundary that, if crossed, allows for no

return to this life. While most NDEs are pleasant, others are horrifying.

Only about one fourth of those who attend a given IANDS meeting have themselves experienced an NDE. Others have lost family members or close friends, and seek reassurance that their loved ones are all right "on the other side." Still others are medical professionals, or those who are curious about, or afraid of death. Some seem to come just to be comforted.

Bill Taylor, a Clarksville resident who serves as president of IANDS, notes that the most common element people experience in their NDE is not, as often reported, the sense of "going through a tunnel."

Instead, he says, it is, "a sense of intensity of love and acceptance that doesn't exist here on Earth."

People seek others who've had a similar experience, searching for it again. And that description of deep, unconditional love is probably what attracts others to the meetings. Some who have become disheartened with traditional religion come to meetings as a sort of substitute church worship.

But that's not what the organization set out to create. IANDS does not put forth any dogma or belief system. The group represents people who've had a spiritual awakening or transformation, and provides an outlet where they may share their experiences without fear of ridicule or censorship.

Many people who have had an NDE cannot talk about it, even in front of family, because their story is rejected. Academic communities have tried to

explain NDEs as the hallucination of minds deprived of oxygen when the heart stopped beating. But a recent study documented in the medical journal "Lancet" casts doubt on that theory, saying that a 13-year study shows the occurrence of NDEs cannot be accounted for by medical factors alone.

Those who have had a NDE report a spiritual experience that may or may not relate to traditional religion. Many say they have met Jesus, or interpret the intense light they experienced as Jesus or Buddha or another figure relevant to their spiritual upbringing. IANDS has members of different cultures and religions in countries throughout the world, although most of the local chapters are in the U.S., Europe and Canada.

Taylor attends a Methodist church and estimates that most of those who come to the local meetings are Christians. However, one member, who attended meetings regularly until she moved to Florida, had been raised in the Jewish faith and strongly identified with Jewish cultural traditions. She was quite shaken, therefore, when she had a NDE and met Jesus.

"I understand now who he is," she reported at meetings. But other member of the Jewish faith did not. Her husband thought she was crazy. However, she e-mailed Taylor from Florida not too long ago and proudly announced that she had finally convinced her husband — and her rabbi!

The monthly IANDS meetings are open to the public. The next meeting is scheduled for Saturday, July 27, 2-4:30 p.m. That meeting will include a dis-

cussion on Kahuna spirituality of the Hawaiian Islands, in addition to NDE experiences and open discussion. To learn more about the IANDS or near-death experiences, visit the Web site at www.IANDS.org. For details or directions, call Bill Taylor at 410-531-3330.