

Chapter 1

What a surprise! I was wondering if I was going to dare to speak about my NDE (Near Death Experience) and just then, the woman beside me told hers, and another person after her! There were three of us at this initial meeting of welcome and information, organized by an important association of volunteers accompanying the dying. Three out of a dozen participants who had had this experience, had believed for a long time that her experience was unique, and had been completely overwhelmed by it.

The subject of this meeting attracted, for the most part, people touched by death, and mourning. It was set up to investigate their reactions in the face of death, in order to prepare them to help those who had only a few months to live.

In France, associations have developed that form volunteers to accompany the dying in palliative-care wards, old age homes, and chronic care hospitals. This development has begun to sensitize the general public, and to attract more and more people of good will who at some point in their lives have been confronted with death, that of a family member or a friend. Of their own death they thought rarely.

It appears that the number of the living who have been actors/spectators of their own death is much higher than stories would lead one to suppose. A large majority of people do not dare to say what they have experienced, nor perhaps even to acknowledge it to themselves, having hidden it deep inside in order to forget.

The success of books and cassette tapes which speak about NDE is revealing. There is the attraction of the sensational and the hope of calming the fear of death, but for many, most especially, the desire to compare these stories with their own experience. Was it normal, and am I still normal? Always followed by disappointment, up until now. For, even if the phenomenon is well described, and even if it proves to unfold in a somewhat stereotyped fashion (see, for example, *La Source Noire (The Dark Well)* of Patrick Van Eersel, no publication gives a clear explanation. Our modern world thirsts after scientific advancements, but doesn't appreciate being stopped mid track. We want to get to the bottom of things, to find the very roots. Certainly, there is a taboo at present, a taboo of philosophical, religious, and existential nature, that closes all investigation.

The proverb, "There is not a worse deaf man than he who does not want to hear" applies here perfectly. Jan Kékévitch wrote an admirable piece of literature to explain that he does not know anything about death; would he have written this same book, *Death*, after the publication of Dr. Moody's first book *Life After Life*? We can ask ourselves this question.

It is evident that many authors lean on their certitude that nothing is known about death with the hope of an after life, in order to dismiss the experiences of the NDE--to the point of denying the upheaval and turmoil known by those who have been subject to the experience and who have thereby become its victims.

Outside NDE, all those who have brushed up against death—whether by surgery, accident, attack, war, with an active or passive role--never leave there unscathed. Gradually, psychological guides help them speak of their experience and reactions, so that they might be liberated and be able to look what actually happened in the face. To look at it, and to face it. Silence is the worst solution. Torture in Algiers, the concentration camps, undermined the lives of thousands of people because no one listened. We need to listen without judging nor taking sides, in order to share the weight of our neighbour's burden.

People at the end of their lives who benefit from an attentive presence can recount and reread their lives. With the help of an active listener, they manage to let go of their earthly existence in peace.

Being heard without being judged allows people to dare to look at themselves in truth, to confront themselves, and to resolve conflicts not previously acknowledged, so as to free themselves from something "not said" and depart calmly from life, or to begin life anew.

To be brutally plunged into death is a violent shock. Those who come back from it undergo a trauma just as violent because they can't talk about their experience when their environment doesn't receive them, or worse, denies them in their experience.

And since so many people currently desire to die without realizing it, because the passage to death is frightening, would it not also be of help to them if we were to speak simply about NDE ?

Chapter 2

Because it is quite ordinary, the story of the NDE that I underwent in 1958 can provide a global vision of diverse NDE experiences.

I was a young adult, 23 years old, and had just changed paths in my professional orientation, after an excellent start in a bachelor's degree of mathematics in Paris. I had become a novice in a monastery. In fact, at 16, God had revealed to me His Truth, very distant from my parents' "religion." Converted, and more and more in love, my most profound desire was to live with, for and by Him.

Because I was suffering once again from sinusitis, an extern nun took me to a hospital.

By pressing on my face, a student doctor verified that it was as I said: the maxillary sinuses were making me suffer. He decided to take an X-ray using a preliminary injection of an opaque neutral liquid. I had had a double sinus operation two years before.

He put a small cotton pad with Novocain on it in my left nostril. Then he positioned the point of the needle.

"No, doctor, it isn't there."

Surprised, he repositioned it a little.

"It is not there. I know. I've already had 18 injections on this side."

"But my Sister, it is I who administer the injection."

I would certainly have protested again had not the sister who was accompanying me asked me to let go and let him do it.

So I gave him my consent and tightened my grip on the crucifix of the rosary attached to my belt; the mark remained on my hand for several days. Such pain! The doctor had had a difficult time transpiercing my jawbone and injecting his opaque liquid into my cheek. There is still some there.

I found myself on a bed, in a room. What, on a bed? . . . how to explain?

My body was laid out on the bed. I could see it clearly because my spirit was over it. On the left of the bed was the nun who had accompanied me, on the right the nurse, and at the threshold of the door, the student doctor who was starting to panic. I have always had a critical and even vindictive spirit. I thought, as I looked at the scene: "If I die, it will serve you right. You will see just what will happen to you!" To kill a patient by giving an injection improperly would not leave him much chance of becoming a doctor.

I was not then dead, I was very much alive, but separated into two distinct entities, and with a behaviour that belonged very much to me.

Then, without hurrying, my spirit followed a long, dark tunnel which led to a light/warmth.

I cannot describe it; no superlative could. Out of this "light/warmth" without words, God asked me if I wanted to die. "Oh, yes!" I wanted to die; for 17 years I had regretted being born, ever since at six years of age I heard my mother and father casting back and forth at each other the responsibility of having let me be born! Nonetheless, I had had to manage to live, rejected by my parents and subjected to the violence of my mother. To die, an opportunity! And this "light/warmth" was infinitely desirable.

"No."

I heard the response, sharp and even brutal. I fled back along the tunnel in the opposite direction and re-entered my body, to the great relief of the three persons present. The nurse offered me a coffee; I refused.

In certain cases, the reintegration doesn't happen without a clash, a clear perception of the soul's refusal to reanimate the body, a feeling of shock and even sonorous protestations heard by those outside.

I was bowled over. I didn't speak of it to anyone for years. Certain people, amongst the very small group that I did speak to about it, wished I had the presence of mind to ask how long I remained inert on the bed, or another similar detail. What is certain is that the moment was very brief, because the student doctor was still present. Of the few days that followed, I remember only having spent the night in this room and that the extern Sister came to fetch me on the following day.

I have always known that it was God that I had met, the glory of God that had dazzled me, because I have another point of comparison, if I dare so to speak, but how could it have been otherwise, with my conversion at 16 years of age? Everything remains engraved on my memory, but even more than that, this vision is still so alive in me that I can renew myself by it, on condition that I accept this event, unbelievable for many.

People started to talk of the NDE much later, towards the end of the 1970s. Thus I lived through it alone, and I didn't accept this "No" that still rang in my ears for many dozens of years. Recently, someone asked me why I didn't try to find again this "light/warmth" by committing suicide. My answer was a reflex: "So that He sends me back again!"

The consequences of this "rejection by God"--how else could I understand it--lasted 43 years, right until He came to fetch me, just as suddenly as when I was 16 years old.

Yes, very clinical, very standard, my NDE, judging by the standard of the books, the cassettes, and the lives stories told to me.

An inert body, all sensations abolished, a separation of soul and body with a vision of events from another angle than the body would perceive, the dark passage or tunnel ending at a great light that all esteem incapable of description.

Often the NDE is due to an accident, and substances are introduced into the body in order to bring it back to life. Here, nothing of the sort, only the stress of pain that declenched the NDE

Even the question asked is classic. "Do you want to come with me? . . . Do you want to stay with me? . . . Do you want to die? There are many forms in different narratives, and only one meaning. It is more than probable that amongst those who answer "Yes", most really die, that is to say, they don't come back to life. It is also probable that amongst those who refuse, some enter into eternity all the same. One evening, on television, in a program based on an exchange of viewpoints, the host was surprised and destabilized for a moment by the reference made by a young woman to her NDE. He quickly brought the discussion around to the main subject, "the love of her mother." This young woman had declared that upon this important question, "Do you want to die?" she had reflected. It was love for her mother, and the sorrow her mother would have in losing her, that made her answer "No," even though the vision of this "light/warmth" attracted her enormously.

But God had rejected my desire to die. Why? Would He have wanted me to speak of my experience (in 1958) and . . . that others speak of it? This idea pursued me for a long time. That which is certain, and which I can see very well with the passage of time, is that the monastery where I was then a novice with only six months of postulancy was not made for me.

There was no communication between the sisters in charge and myself; the "interviews" with the novice masters were often characterized by a mutual silence.

Rejected by God. "No." Just as I had been by my parents. Why should I force myself to stay? I would have become a "sister of habit" maybe, and even become rigid, by my concern to conform. I left without a word of explanation and picked up again, with success, my mathematical studies.

Chapter 3

To speak of it, but with whom?

In 1958, no one was ready to listen to a spiritual phenomenon, such an unbelievable experience. For a good number of years, manifestations of God had been excluded from the Catholic faith, and from the Orthodox. Evdokimov, in 1973, quoted the “crazy love of God” (“L’Amour fou de Dieu,” Ed. Seuil, p. 25) of Seraphim of Sarov, who died in 1833.

Under the pretext of “light,” we have become engaged in an obscurity of ignorance. This is so much so that today we find inconceivable the manifestations of God to humans which were conceived by our ancestors as events known to everyone and not at all strange.

Even family, parents, brothers, spouses, barely accepted the physical phenomenon of separation into two distinct entities. A large emotional instability followed, especially amongst adolescents, coming from our experience of a great instability of being.

After a NDE, one’s life is always thrown upside down and profoundly changed. An unsettling occurs in order that one might discover, or rediscover, the equilibrium in one’s life. For those who undergo a long hospitalization, it’s through many tedious hours of solitary reflection that this transformation is carried out. Others try to find themselves in other, social groups parallel, experience. Some accept that God has manifested Himself to them and benefit from the consequences; others will go as far as to deny the experience they have lived, and in this negation reject a part of their personality with all the psychological effects this entails. Still others keep silent until the moment of their final “real” death approaches. Expressing themselves becomes a way of demystifying this last passage.

Each and everyone hopes to find an explanation, even a reason, and multiplies their contacts with diverse religious representatives, or reads specialized books.

Because in the 1960s there was nothing, I became angry with God, and was certainly not the only person in such a state. And we’ll never know how many, taking the opposite path, came back to him.

What is evident is the absolute discretion with which, using code words, one dared to speak with extremely select interlocutors, ready to stop the narrative at the slightest sign of apparent refusal.

Except twice, in order to appease a situation of extreme distress, I had not told my story up until the day when, thinking I saw a lifesaver, I jumped into the deep end. After 44 years. It really was a life-saver, this meeting at this association. There were three of us speaking, coupled with the return of the lost sheep to the sheepfold (Luke 15:4-7), and followed by being listened to in a monastery.

Chapter 4

“Manifestations of God to humans are conceived by the ancients as common to all” (Seraphim of Sarov).

In the Old Testament, one finds traces of the ecstasies experienced by those chosen by Yahweh to guide the Jewish people.

The New Testament contains the recital of several ecstasies. In one, the deacon St. Stephen tells his experience “live,” as we would now say, at the actual moment of his death.

St. Paul relates, fourteen years afterward, evidently constrained by the attitude of the Corinthians in his second epistle to them (ch. 12:3-4), “This man was ravished up into the third heaven whether in the body or out of the body. I do not know, God knows. I knew that he was caught up into Paradise and heard an ineffable thing, which no one may utter” (New American Bible)

Fourteen years later, this ecstasy remained alive, engraved in his memory as in the first days, just as profoundly as his own conversion, an indestructible imprint that St. Augustine comments on several times.

* « Nous devons comprendre qu'il ignorait si, lorsqu'il a été ravi au 3e ciel, il était dans son corps, à la manière dont l'âme est dans le corps... ou bien s'il était tout à fait sorti de son corps, en sorte que ce dernier était étendu mort, jusqu'au moment où, la vision achevée, son âme revint dans ses membres morts, et qu'il reprit connaissance, non comme un homme qui sort de son sommeil ou d'une extase qui l'avait privé de l'usage de ses sens, mais comme un mort qui ressuscite » (De Gen ad litt XII,5,14).

* « C'est dans le transport de son esprit, lorsqu'élevé au-dessus de la vie des sens et comme ravi en Dieu qu'il avait vu cette lumière » (SERM LII, 16).

* « On peut être embarrassé pour savoir comment la substance même de Dieu a pu être vue par quelques hommes pendant leur vie, puisqu'il fut dit à Moïse :

'Personne, pendant sa vie, ne peut voir ma face', à moins que l'esprit humain ne puisse, par un divin ravissement, être transporté de cette vie dans la vie des Anges, avant d'être délivré des liens de la chair, par la mort commune à tous les hommes. Car c'est ainsi que fut ravi celui qui entendit d'ineffables paroles, que la bouche humaine ne saurait répéter, lorsqu'il fut tellement enlevé au sentiment de cette vie mortelle, qu'il ne pouvait dire lui-même, si alors son âme était restée dans son corps, ou si elle l'avait quitté ... Il a donc été dit avec vérité : 'Personne de son vivant ne peut voir ma face', car l'âme est nécessairement enlevée au sens de cette vie mortelle, lorsqu'elle est ravie dans ces ineffables visions, et il n'est pas incroyable que quelques saints qui n'étaient pas encore délivrés de la vie, au point de ne laisser que leurs cadavres à ensevelir, aient reçu de Dieu la grâce d'une si grande révélation. »

(Liber de videndo Deo Ep CXLVII, XIII 31)

**** quotations of St. Augustine in English needed De Gen ad Litt****

St. Teresa of Avila, ten centuries later, describes the same phenomenon in her Life, written by herself.

In these raptures it seems that the soul is not animating the body. Thus there is a very strong feeling that the natural bodily heat is failing. The body gradually grows cold, although this happens with the greatest ease and delight ... very often ... the ecstasy comes upon you with a swift and powerful force. There is brought about a new estrangement from earthly things that makes life much more arduous When ... the body is in ecstasy it is as though dead Sometimes it happened to me that my senses failed me completely. (ch. 20, para 3, 8, 18)

St. Augustine investigates the origin of ecstasy: “English quotation needed De Gen ad Litt”

* « L'extase est un ravissement de l'esprit : quelquefois la peur la produit ; mais, quelquefois aussi, elle est l'effet d'une révélation qui soustrait l'esprit aux sens corporels, afin qu'il puisse contempler ce qui doit lui être révélé. » (Enar in Psalm LXVII, 36)

* « C'est donc d'une manière ineffable ... que Dieu parle et fait entendre un langage ineffable, quand Il parle dans son être divin, dans lequel nul être vivant ne peut le voir en cette vie mortelle où l'on ne vit que dans les sens du corps, et s'il ne meurt à cette vie, en quelque sorte, soit en sortant en effet de la chair, soit en étant ravi et soustrait aux sens charnels. » (De Gen ad litt XII, 27, 55)

But St. Paul told often of his conversion, and only once of this ecstasy. He was constrained by difficulties due to the stirrings of certain Christians in Corinth.

St. Teresa of Avila doesn't hesitate to blame the confessors of her era, the 16th century, who were most reluctant to listen to her accounts. "What these persons suffer when their confessors do not understand them is a pity from this comes the pain the soul suffers, of having to return to everyday life." (Ch 20, para. 21)

These are difficulties and suffering that I myself knew after my NDE, exaggerated also because I couldn't have imagined a connection between this excursion with God and ecstasy. This, we believed, was the privilege of the saints. But, already in 1952, Matta el Maskine[1] wrote:

"All those who have known rapture in God, or in reality, those who have had their souls filled with the love of God That doesn't go away, even though the state of grace is not linked with this condition; it can go and seek out a man and suddenly surprise him, without any merit or preparation on his part, and cause him to enter into an ecstasy, as though he were falling like a well-beloved prey into the hands of all powerful love that deprives him of his liberty and his self consciousness in order to fill him with an unspeakable happiness and an indescribable knowledge. That is why it is not possible for us to consider the experience of ecstasy as the privilege of those who are more spiritually advanced" (L'expérience de Dieu dans la vie de prière Ed Bellefontaine ch. 3, p. 88 (The Experience of God in the Life of Prayer)).

We human beings, limited as we are, have always had a tendency to imprison God in a network of actions acceptable to us but denying God his total freedom. Freedom that we have no scruple about demanding for ourselves, outside of all logic, because we have received it from Him. On the contrary, the whole Bible, the story of the Jewish people and that of Jesus, tell us of God's initiatives, which to modern man are not only unexpected but even aberrant.

"But," objected Moses, "suppose they will not believe me, nor listen to my plea? For they may say, 'the Lord did not appear to you' If you please, my Lord, send someone else" (Ex 4). Moses is conscious of the stumbling block of his neighbours

"Off with you, visionary, flee the land of Judah," was said to Amos (Am. 7) who found himself compelled to prophesy although he was only a simple shepherd, assuredly more tranquil behind his herd.

"The bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world Many of his disciples ... no longer accompanied him." (John 6.) Who could believe Him? And ever since, thousands of millions of humans have believed and have lived out this belief, even unto death.

Is God not someone who disturbs us because He created us in his own image and He is completely other?

[1] *Matta el Maskine: after a stay in a monastery in the Egyptian deserts, this Coptic monk became the spiritual father of the Monastery of the Syriens (Deus el Souriane). Several of his writings have been published by the Monastic Editions of the Abbaye de Bellefontaine.*

* *the quotations of saint Augustin are on standby of translation*

Chapter 5

It is impossible to know if this spiritual experience occurs more frequently now or in past times, for the fact remains that the lid was kept upon any revelations that might have been made here or there amongst especially selected friends.

The great merit of the books written by Dr. Raymond Moody (ed. Robert Laffond, 1977) was to bring to life that which was whispered in the dark. And since then, Protestants and Catholics, the faithful, pastors, priests—all have affirmed that the NDE strongly resembles what St. Paul relates to the Corinthians.

However, there is a difference that jumps off the page between the narrations of the saints and those of the vulgum pecus.

Often, in the NDE, the soul traverses a dark tunnel, that seems more or less long, before arriving at this “light/heat” of great benevolence and of an exceptionally compelling force. An individual chosen by God, but from our point of view picked by a stroke of chance, has no particular virtues that place him in, our esteem, among the saints. Is not this dark tunnel the manifestation of an ultimate purification necessary to attain the vision of the Glory of God? St. John of the Cross wrote a spiritual treatise, *The Dark Night*. We employ the same image, conscious of our deficiency to express in earthly words a reality that we will capture better and more deeply after our definitive corporal death.

This is consistent in all narrations of the NDE. We are all sure to have touched our corporal death in extreme proximity. We rediscover the story of Moses, he whom “Yahweh knew face to face” (Deut 34) and to whom He said: “No human can see me and live” (Ex. 33). Moses, however, entered into the cloud that surrounded the glory of God (Ex. 24) and was thereby so illuminated that his companions could not bear for long the brilliance of his face, and he covered it with a veil (Ex. 34).

We have all been profoundly changed, looking at life from a completely different viewpoint, whether we have brushed against death in a coma or whether it was the NDE itself that pushed us into it. Was it not a simple needle, even if her jawbone was transpierced, that could have provoked death in a young adult without any cardiac risk, in good health?

Some have discovered a great joy in being alive every morning. Others throw themselves into activities that are perilous, but useful to others, with no worry of the danger to themselves. Many try, in their daily life, to help sick or aged persons at the end of their lives.

None fears death, and none seeks death—their own or others’—for its own sake, because we have understood viscerally that God alone is its master.

Chapter 6

“It is a pity to see how much confessors make them suffer” (86, Teresa of Avila).

Suffer, because to listen to the story of an NDE is uncomfortable for the person who receives it. It makes him confront his fear of death—his own death. Even more, there is a great suspicion towards the person being listened to; it is a dream, imagination, fabrication, hallucination, the effect of drugs, an experience of spirits, or the words of someone mentally ill. In fact, if the person being listened to claims to have touched death and met God, he must be a saint, or at least someone revered by his companions, whether lay or monastic. Therefore it cannot have happened to him or her. And so, the refusal to believe. At best, one should regard this story as null and void; a kindly smile softens the refusal to keep listening. “You have not committed any serious sins, so I will give you absolution” (sic).

For many, their attempts to confide in others have run into a brick wall.

To non-believers, it is an illusion since one cannot meet that which does not exist.

To Christians, especially those who hold responsibility in the Church, what is important is to hold to what is known about death, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life: the Credo. “Even if one of the dead comes back to life, they will not be convinced” (Lk 16, translation St. Joan of Arc) explains Jesus, in concluding a parable that tells of a man condemned to hell by his profound selfishness.

We can easily understand how someone can become bitter, and close in on herself, when the force of her has only provoked mockery.

How can we explain the rejection of practicing Catholics, disappointed and wounded by the barriers which members of the Church put up against any further contact with them? For dozens of years, I did not re-enter a church. When my volunteer work with an association obliged me to do so, I would say curtly: “I will say hello to you (I knew for years that He was there) but I am angry.” When I entered into the Church of Farafangana in Madagascar, the Lord turned me upside down in a split second. I had gone in to take photos and I had explicitly told Him while pushing open the door: “Photos only! That’s all.” I took my photos. One of them was a wooden sculpture of Christ, very dark on a black wood cross. He stole inside me by stealth and simply asked my permission to stay. For respect of human liberty is primordial to God. As a young man tastefully put it to me, “He asked for your hand in marriage.”

A few of us have been able to confide in a priest or a monk who was not shocked by the confidence. But neither did they gain much attention by it. For those who are accustomed to the vocabulary of “prayer, dryness, desolation” so common to contemplatives, the NDE is only one manifestation of God amongst others. It is commonplace, and one ought not to make a big thing of it, any more than of ecstasy. What does Matta el Mashine think of this? (op cit1 p.89)

"The human is a constantly evolving being, called to grow spiritually so as to approach God. But unconscious ecstasy is not the only path for this evolution ... for coming closer to God. There are souls ... who can, in full consciousness, attain such a degree of self-effacement that ... in an instant they find themselves face to face with God, when the soul reaches a higher level of authentic love. This conscious experience ... is considered best linked to a life of prayer, and best realized in relation to the development of the spiritual life".

These guides, insisting on a spiritual life based on prayer and the sacraments, forget that it was the NDE that brought these penitents to them brutally throwing them into a new orientation, very distant from what they know and possibly even opposed to it.

And their concern to help those who receive their counsels, to construct for them a life more strongly amplified by faith, leads them to voluntarily minimize the impact of the NDE. A dissonance can thus install itself between them, and indeed can become a veritable gulf. If more attention were accorded to the turmoil caused by the NDE, the guides might admit that it is the pillar around which a new life, a new way of thinking, a new birth, is being created, and that it has triggered a phenomenal acceleration along the spiritual path because it touches souls unprepared. Then the guides would be more able to ease the solitude and disarray of those who ask them for help.

Of course, the Church is also an institution. As such, it can be afraid of being abused by these, often uneducated, persons who are the recipients of a spiritual experience. An experience of death could give rise to a diminished fear of the Church. For many centuries, and even now, it has been the fear of death and of the “last judgment” (in various formulations) that has held the population in awe of laws, rites, and officials of different religions, broadly speaking. Mortal sin leads us to eternal damnation. Using such images, which conjured up an unfavourable, inevitable destiny, religion allows humans to escape into a future life where there will be complete happiness. Are not the funeral rites of all human generations created in order to dispel this fear?

How do archeologists distinguish the traces left by humans from those left by hominids? By the presence of the traces of funeral rites. Loss cannot be truly overcome unless a death rite has been held, sometimes taking the form of condemning the one responsible for death.

Chapter 7

A disciple of Saint Benedict does not avoid sin simply because of the fear of death, or else he would not last long in monastic life.' Is it not, more objectively speaking, that he prefers God above all?

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us along the way?" cried the disciples at Emmaus (Lk 24).

"Lord, you died out of love for me. I will live out of love for you, and if I cannot manage to tell you that I love you, at least I want to love you. (A Chartreux monk, 20th century.)

"All I desire, my God, is that your will be done in me, and in all your creatures." (Charles de Foucauld, 19th century)

And going back in time we find, along with numerous macabre dances of death and terrifying last judgments in churches, passionate texts:

"Ah, dear love, if there is a love that I love, it is You, my love" (Hadewijch of Anvers, 13th century).

"O Lord, strip me of all that distances me from you O Lord, take myself from myself and make me wholly You." (Nicholas de Flue, 15th century)

From other civilizations, the Upanishad (800 B.C.): "The BEING remains hidden. He rarely unveils himself, but he reveals himself to those who have a keen look and a clear, purified vision" (ed. Altess).

"Having realized BEING, the sages reach joy This supreme union is the goal of Vedanta. The Sages and liberated ones who have lived in this state have triumphed over death and, when they pass away, remain united with the Unique." (ed. Varenne).

Or even closer, in Islam:

"O my Lord, if I serve you out of the fear of hell, make me burn in hell. If I serve you out of the hope of heaven, refuse me your heaven. But if I serve you for your good pleasure, do not refuse me your eternal splendor." (Rabia Al Aduwiyah, II C, de l'Hegue, 9th century).

Hope, the consciousness of an everlasting joy after this present life, is consistent in the heart and spirit of all humankind throughout the whole earth. For Christians, it is the meeting, the ultimate life, with a personal God, a God so personal that He sent his Word, his Son, to earth in order to draw us to Himself. All those who have had an NDE express the impossibility of describing this "light/heat" they have seen, which is for them Ultimate Joy, but it reflects in their eyes when they speak of it.

For me, as for many of those whom I have heard, whether directly or through intermediaries, it is a temporary plunge into the Glory of God, the Unique, assuring us of our happiness to come.

"For we know partially ... at present we see indistinctly, in an enigma" (St. Paul, 1 Cor. 13).

"Man at present, whatever the level of his faith, continues to ask himself why God has acted in this way and not in another. Many things appear unexplainable and unknown to him, affected by a mental obscurity.

"God can reveal himself to humanity." There opens to us in this century a new path towards clear vision, not by human faith but by divine revelation ... according to the good pleasure of His will." (Matta el Maskine, op. cit., pp. 98 ff).

The saints and the mystics have always had ecstasies. In all probability, the NDE has always existed, unexpected ecstasies in conjunction with an aborted passage towards death. Are they more frequent in our times, with medical progress facilitating these experiences? No one can say, because in former times no one spoke of them.

Let us listen to these narrations, messages of those who have undergone this scorching experience. Let us confront their stories with our different beliefs and different civilizations. May Christians integrate this experience so that, like others, it might nourish our faith. Instead of neglecting these illuminations that God has the mercy and concern to give us, should we not rather use them as a trampoline for our contemporaries, especially the young, for whom the idea of God is a stranger in their lives?

The writing of these few pages is an invitation to speak about all this with simplicity. It is also an invitation for religious leaders to listen and to admire God in his loving initiatives, so often unexpected, but always renewed