

How I Came to Spend My Life Among the Once Nearly Dead: Ken Ring's Story

Ken Ring

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of Kenneth Ring's autobiography, as well as his major scientific contributions to the formation of the now well-known, field of near-death studies. This article is a delightful and personally engaging story written directly by the author, which will both profoundly touch the reader and tickle his/her sense of humor. Ring discusses how he first became interested in near-death experiences (NDEs) following a life-altering experience with LSD. From there, Ring caught the "benign virus," as he eloquently calls it in his book, *Lessons from the Light* (1998), and dedicated the next few decades of his life to scientifically establishing the legitimacy of NDE research – establishing him as one of the pioneers in this field, next to Raymond Moody, Bruce Greyson, and a few others. Although his life-long work is much too extensive to overview in this small article, he has written five major books on this topic, has conducted numerous studies, written scores of papers, and travelled the globe lecturing and teaching about NDEs.

Key Words: Ken Ring, LSD, psychedelics, mindsight, near-death experiences, scientific research

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It all began with two little purple pills.
But they weren't Nexium.

They were two LSD capsules, but I
didn't know that then.

I had better back up and explain.

In the early 1970s, just after I had
turned 35, I was a newly appointed full
professor of psychology with tenure at the
University of Connecticut. And I was
discontented. Not with my personal life, but
with the field of social psychology in which I
had been trained and hired to teach. I had
recently published a critique of experimental
social psychology, castigating it for the
pursuit of merely clever and flashy research
of the "can you top this" variety, which did

not make me many friends. In any event, I
was suffering from a sort of early career
crisis, having become disenchanted with this
domain of psychology.

In March of 1971, when my wife and I
went off to the Berkshires to celebrate our
anniversary, I happened to pick up a book
that my wife was then reading – Carlos
Castañeda's first book, *The Teachings of Don
Juan* (1968). It looked intriguing and after
she had finished it, I read it.

I was then a typical Jewish professor
– wedded to rational thought, committed to
science and atheistic in my worldview. I had
no interest in religion and very little
knowledge of mysticism. But I was open to
new experiences, and what had particularly
excited me about Castañeda's (1968) book
was his discussion of what he called "seeing
the crack between the worlds," which he had
apparently effected through the use of
mescaline.

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At the time, I had never considered using psychedelic drugs and my only familiarity with anything close was having smoked marijuana a few times. But since I had never been a smoker, even that was difficult for me, and my experiences with it, though of the usual kind, did not have any particular impact on my life.

Nevertheless, since there was a colleague in my department at the time whom I knew was familiar with psychedelics, I approached him to tell him about my interest to take mescaline and why. He had read Castañeda's (1968) book and knew what I was after.

I came to the point. Could he provide me with some mescaline? He could.

By then it was early May. The semester was just about over. He told me not to read anything further on the subject and just come to his apartment on the following Saturday.

That day turned out to be a rare beautiful sun-splashed day with everything beginning to bloom. My colleague lived at the edge of a forest. He suggested that I take the mescaline in his apartment, wait just a bit and listen to music, and then go outside and into the nearby woods.

And then he gave me two purple pills to ingest.

I did not know my colleague well, and as I was soon to find out, he was not only impish, but embodied the trickster archetype. While he led me to believe I was taking mescaline, he had actually given me 300 micrograms of LSD.

I will not bore you with an account of the next twelve hours. Suffice it to say that all the pillars of my previous ontological categories soon began to crumble into dust. At the time and afterward, I realized that this was the most important and most transformative experience of my life – and forty years later, I still feel the same way. Nothing could ever be the same.

The one portion of the experience I will allude to here – because it eventually led me to the study of near-death experiences (NDEs) – took place when I was sitting on a log near a stream in the woods. I don't know how long I was there, but at some point for a moment outside of time I – except there was

no "I" any longer – experienced an intruding of the most intense and overwhelming rapturous LOVE and knew instantly that this was the real world, and that the universe, if I can put it this way, was stitched in the fabric of this love, and that I was home. However, again I have to repeat: There was *only* this energy of love and "I" was an indissoluble part of it, not separate from it.

I spent the next three years trying to come to terms with what had happened to me.

Before this, I had been very active as a young professor – I had published a fair amount, I had been promoted pretty fast, and I was the head of my division of social psychology, and served on important departmental committees, etc.

Afterward, I didn't publish anything for three years. During that time, I was engaged in a spiritual search for understanding, and there were consequences.

My wife could no longer relate to who I was and to the kind of company I was keeping, which eventually led to a very painful and traumatic divorce. My departmental colleagues didn't know what to make of me either. A very distinguished clinical psychologist, who had always taken an avuncular interest in me, put his arm around me one day and said, "We're just waiting for you to come back to us, Ken."

I never did.

Since this article is supposed to be about mentoring, perhaps I should mention the mentoring that I received during this inchoate period of my search for a new identity.

At that time, there was a graduate student in my department named Bob Hoffman who, I soon discovered, was engaged in a similar quest of his own. It was Bob who introduced me to the work of the English Theosophical researcher, Robert Crookall, whose books discussed phenomena that were, as I would only later realize, cognate to what would come to be called near-death experiences. And in 1972, Bob drew my attention to an article by the psychiatrist, Russell Noyes (1972), entitled "The Experience of Dying," which recounted several examples of near-death experiences,

though again that term was not yet in use. I remember how much these accounts affected me – I think in part because I recognized that they were describing revelations similar to those that had come to me during my LSD trip.

Also in that same year, Bob told me about a conference that was to be held up in Amherst on something called “transpersonal psychology,” of which I had never heard.

“I think we should go to this,” said Bob. And since Bob was leading me by the nose in those days, I quickly assented.

It was then that everything started to come together for me. As my LSD experience had been pivotal for me, so would this conference be.

I don't remember all the speakers who gave presentations that day – I do recall Stan Grof and Joan Halifax, Jim Fadiman, and I think Ram Dass may have there as well, and maybe even Stan Krippner – but I do remember my feeling of joy at discovering all these eminent professionals had been through something similar to me (only of course, in far greater depth and with a level of erudition that was so much beyond my ken – or Ken – that they were like intellectual heroes to me), and had built new lives for themselves around their psychedelic experiences. And more – that I was, without having known it, a transpersonal psychologist! I had contemplated leaving the academy and psychology altogether, but now I saw I could remain a psychologist after all. Except I would have to teach a new way, learn a new subject, and somehow undertake research in this emerging field of transpersonal psychology.

I returned to the university on fire. I was starting over.

Fortunately, I had a fair degree of freedom to teach at least one course of my own design, so I put together a graduate course on transpersonal psychology and offered it the next academic year. It attracted an unusual assortment of students and even a couple of professors as well as a Catholic priest.

One of the students was a rather hard-bitten and stand-offish lesbian. Unlike most the rest of the students, she rarely expressed any emotion in class but was, on

the contrary, rather phlegmatic and stolid. During one class, toward the end of that semester, I was reading some accounts of people's experiences of dying from the article by Russell Noyes, and I looked up to find that this student was sobbing uncontrollably. I think that was the first time I realized how powerful these stories could be.

I don't have the space here (and you wouldn't have the patience to read it) to continue to provide an account of my “spiritual adventures,” so to speak, and related professional pursuits over the next few years that eventually led me to the study of near-death experiences, so let me just fast-forward to the spring of 1976. I was sitting outside my house, just after the spring semester had ended, and was reading a little book that I had come to my attention through a journal review by a new friend of mine. The book had been brought out by a small publisher in Georgia and was entitled *Life After Life* (Moody, 1975).

Written by a psychiatrist named Raymond Moody, Jr., it was an anecdotal account of what Moody dubbed “near-death experiences.”

By the next year, after it had been picked up by Bantam Books, it was an international bestseller and the term near-death experience had entered the language of ordinary discourse.

I am holding a copy of the book now and I see all the excited marginal notes, exclamation points, and underlinings that I made at the time. What I remember thinking was:

“This is it!”

I knew that I wanted to find a way to do research that would help me understand what had happened to me during my LSD trip – and that my own spiritual explorations weren't sufficient for me. I had always enjoyed doing research and needed to find a way to satisfy that need of mine. I also knew that I was not cut out to be a “druggie,” and that for a multitude of reasons psychedelic research was not an option for me. And from reading Moody's book, I could see, with increasing clarity that his near-death experiencers had indeed encountered the same realm – and so much more – that had so shattered me. I could learn from them. They would be my teachers.

You see, I was never interested in death *per se*, much less with the question of life after death. What animated me and drew me to study near-death experiences was my desire to understand the *state of consciousness* and the transpersonal domains that I had begun to experience when I took LSD. Thus, researching NDEs, I saw then, could marry my spiritual search with my work as a transpersonal psychologist.

By the time I had finished Moody's book – indeed *before* I had finished it – I already had fleshed out the kind of research I would do. I intended to do a *scientific* study of near-death experiences by interviewing many people who had come close to death. These I would find by making contact with various hospitals in Hartford. I wanted, if possible, to bolster Moody's findings by moving beyond anecdotes to a systematic scientific study and analysis of the near-death experience, and to help bring the phenomenon to the attention of scientists and other professionals.

At that time, I always had a kind of coterie of students who were interested to take my classes and just "hang out" with me. And as it happened, a number of them approached me then and asked me, in effect, "what I was up to." I told them, and they all signed on. I had a "research team" form around me almost spontaneously, and after that every door opened for me without my hardly having do more than put my hand on the doorknob. It was almost as if it were all ordained.

So in short order, I wrote up a grant proposal for the study I had in mind, got it funded, approached various hospitals in Hartford, secured their permission, designed the instruments for the study, and with my research team, set out to interview as many people as I could find who had been referred to us because they had come close to death.

I wound up doing most of the interviews myself for thirteen months, beginning in May of 1977, during which time I bombed all over Connecticut and pretty much burned out my old Chevy in the process. Ultimately, we had more than 100 people in our sample.

By the following May, I remember sitting outside at a picnic table going over my

data – by hand. (Those were the days even before computers!) My girlfriend at the time popped over that day and I remember telling her in exactly these words: "I'm sitting on dynamite. People are just not going to believe this!"

Well before this time, however, there was already another event that was to prove to be a decisive turning point in my life as a fledgling NDE researcher.

I was in my kitchen, stirring some cream sauce when the phone rang. Still stirring the pot, I reached across for the phone and heard an unfamiliar voice on the line speaking with a southern accent.

"Hello, Ken? This is Raymond Moody."

"No shit?" I replied.

I stopped stirring my cream sauce.

Raymond wanted to invite me down to Charlottesville, Virginia, where he then lived, along with several other researchers whom he had heard were following up on his work, and someone had drawn his attention to me. That someone – a sociologist colleague of Moody's named John Audette – would soon be in touch about the arrangements, but meanwhile Raymond was hoping I could come down.

Could I!

On November 19, 1977, one of my research associates, Sue Palmer, who had been of inestimable help to me in carrying out my original research (and who was one of two dedicatees of my first book on the subject in 1980, *Life at Death*), and I loaded up my car and headed down to Virginia where I would meet not only Raymond, but several other professionals who were to play key pioneering roles in the development of the field of near-death studies – in particular, Bruce Greyson, Michael Sabom, and John Audette, all of whom were to become key colleagues of mine. Everything of importance really began from that first meeting.

Honestly, I don't really want to rehash my career because I have other things to discuss, such as mentoring, and I am running out of space. So you will have to settle for the briefest of summaries.

In August, 1978, Greyson, Sabom, Audette, and I established an organization to

further the professional study of NDEs, which Audette headed for a couple of years. Late in 1980, he asked me if I would take it over and run it “for a year” while he devoted himself to NDE research. I agreed, but with conditions. I wanted to re-name it and call it The International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), make it into a dues-paying membership organization, establish a headquarters for it at the university, found a scholarly NDE journal (now called the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*), etc. All of which I was able to do, thanks to the support of Greyson and Audette, the kindness of my department head who found space for an office, and the invaluable assistance of a core of student volunteers who helped me set up and run the organization, which I did, at least for a time, as my personal fiefdom. We had fun!

That same year, 1980, I published *Life at Death* (1980/1982), and over the next twenty years or so, I wrote four other books on NDEs and scores of articles on the subject. I traveled all over the States and internationally shooting off my mouth on NDEs. I was interviewed on innumerable TV and radio shows and in the press. I received thousands of letters and, before the days of e-mail, wrote thousands in reply. For years I lived with various NDE students and colleagues in a large house that I soon dubbed “The Near-Death Hotel.” I had the time of my life – the very best of times. I was the grateful recipient of a thousand kindnesses and met so many wonderful and some very extraordinary people.

During this entire period, I was always helped by the students I was privileged to teach and who worked with me as my assistants and from whom I learned so much. I trust they learned a few things from me. So, sure, I mentored many of them, I suppose, but I never really thought of it that way. Some of these students stand out for me, so I can at least mention a few. I’ve already referred to Sue Palmer. There was also another student of mine, Teresa Carilli, who, like Sue, helped me so much in my original NDE research, and is a co-dedicatée of my book, *Life at Death* (1980/1982), along with Sue. There was Christopher J. Rosing, who was my man for all purposes when I conducted my research that led to my book, *The Omega Project* (1992). And Sharon

Cooper, who carried out most of the interviews for my study of NDEs in the blind that culminated in the book, *Mindsight* (1999), on which I made Sharon a co-author (even though I did all the writing) because her contribution to the study was indispensable.

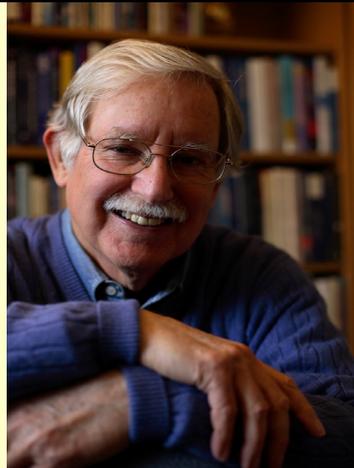
And, heck, there were many more over the years who took my classes on NDEs or transpersonal psychology, a number of whom have gone on to have professional careers. I still am in touch with some of these former students and I am not embarrassed to say, though it is immodest of me, that I treasure a scrapbook of letters from other students who have expressed their indebtedness to me. One of them, who had worked with me in the early days of IANDS, even became a MacArthur Fellow, but I had nothing to do with that, of course. I was just lucky he passed through my life.

As shared in a recent interview with *Vital Signs*, a newsletter published by the International Association for Near-Death Studies:

I wrote my last substantial article on NDEs and gave my last public talk on the subject in 2000. By that time, I had been studying, writing about, and lecturing on NDEs for 23 years, was approaching 65, and felt that it was time for me to hang up my NDE spikes, as it were, and move on to other things. It wasn’t just that I felt I had had my chance to have my say, but there was something else that prompted this decision, although I know this might sound to some like a mere rationalization, or maybe even just a self-serving delusion! But, anyway, for a long time I had felt myself to be, as it were, in service to the Light and tried to conduct my work in this spirit. However, as the end of the millennium approached, I had the distinct inner sense that I was somehow being “released” from my contract and, to make a bit of a joke about it, was given the equivalent of “a golden handshake.” Of course, I don’t mean to give myself airs, but I just felt that it was time for me to go. But I would never want people to think that I ever lost my interest in NDEs simply because I no longer wanted to be actively involved in the field. On the contrary, even after this time, and to this day, I have maintained my contact with some of my colleagues and some of my NDEr friends,

and I have continued to try to help researchers, students, and others in their work, and NDErs, too – just in a more private and more or less publicly invisible capacity. I would like people who still remember me to know that I will always regard my work in the field of near-death studies as the blessing of my life and as the greatest privilege I have ever been granted (Ring, 2011, p. 7).

About the author



Kenneth Ring (born 1935) is Professor Emeritus of psychology at the University of Connecticut, and a researcher within the field of near-death studies. He is co-founder and past president of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) and is the founding editor of the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*.

Ring was born in San Francisco, California and currently lives in Kentfield, California. In November 2008, Ring visited Israel as part of a peace delegation and subsequently protested the Israeli air strikes on the Gaza Strip as completely disproportionate.

Ring's book *Life at Death* was published by William Morrow and Company in 1980. In 1984, the company published Ring's second book, *Heading Toward Omega*. Both books deal with near-death experiences and how they change people's lives. Other books by Ring include *The Omega Project: Near-Death Experiences, UFO Encounters, and Mind at Large* (1992), *Mindsight: Near-death and out-of-body experiences in the blind* (1999) and *Lessons from the Light* (2000). He is also the coauthor of *Methods of Madness: The Mental Hospital as a Last Resort*.

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