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**A TERRIBLE BEAUTY:
A MOVIE MASTERPIECE ABOUT TRANSCENDING VIOLENT
DEATH
On Peter Weir's *Fearless***

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....*this knot intricate
Of life at once untie!*

—Shakespeare, Anthony and Cleopatra

*All changed, changed utterly;
A terrible beauty is born.*

—W. B. Yeats, Easter 1916

There have been many attempts to deal with near-death experiences on the screen, but this is the first I've seen which has managed to convey the actual *feeling* of a dimension beyond the life of space and time, by what I can only call a masterpiece of directorial art. And perhaps the best evidence of its masterpiece-status is that airline companies haven't got together to buy up and destroy all copies, lest the public be put off flying forever by its vivid re-enactment of a jetliner crash from passengers' eye-view.

This occurs not just once in the film, but three times, as the hero, Max (superbly acted by Jeff Bridges), flashbacks to the events that occurred when his flight home from Texas to San Francisco crashed somewhere in prairie-country. The wreckage we see in the film's opening shots is gruesome enough, but because Max is meant to be discovering progressively more in these flashbacks about what happened in the crash itself, each rerun shows progressively more of the howling destruction going on all around him as the plane breaks up, with no punches pulled and no detail spared. Yet far from aggravating fear of flying, the final effect is the absolute reverse. Weir has pulled off the incredible achievement of enabling viewers actually to feel for themselves how at such moments human consciousness can transcend fear, and indeed mortality itself, by *moving out of time*.

So effective is it, I even wonder if the film wouldn't be positively reassuring as inflight entertainment on a bumpy run—or perhaps that would be going too far! The same cautionary thought makes me hesitate to press anyone with a really weak heart to see it, though I've not heard of any casualties in cinemas yet. But readers of this journal should be more prepared than most to envision what are, after all, well-known facts about death in air disasters, so having entered my caveat, I'll go ahead and urge you to catch *Fearless* on the big screen if you still can when this article comes out. If that's impossible, get a video without delay, and sit as close to the screen as you comfortably can when you watch it—because to get the full “feeling-message” from the climactic final rerun of the crash, just before the film ends, you need to be *surrounded* by the vision and sound.

Then, if you've really gone along with Weir's enormously skillful lead-up to that scene in the rest of the film, and can let yourself experience the roaring, screaming disintegration with Max himself, I believe you'll find a meaning you've never dreamed of in Shakespeare's now

hackneyed statement that love “looks on tempests and is never shaken.” I’ll admit unashamedly that tears were streaming down my face as I watched it, for it recaptured for me the most important experience of my life, when I myself came to the brink in 1983 and discovered, in a moment of time-stop, that human consciousness is grounded in the same fundamental energy that moves the sun and other stars *and tempests too*—an energy for which “love” is the only word we have, though its common sentimental associations are hopelessly misleading.

And from quizzing other viewers who’ve not had the experience personally, I believe Weir’s artistic genius has succeeded in the almost impossible task of getting across even to “outsiders” the fundamental *feeling* of near-death experiences, and why they change lives. Earlier movies on the subject, which have tried to re-enact scenes of people floating up out of their bodies and moving down tunnels into heavenly light, fall so far short of capturing the life-changing feeling that I think they deserve the Monty Python sendup in *The Meaning of Life*. (There, the middle-class couples who’ve died of food-poisoning float out of their bodies into “astral” forms, *drive* down the tunnel in astral versions of their family cars, and find that the light at the tunnel’s end is a luxury hotel, with a Hollywood-style Grand Christmas Cabaret perpetually in progress “especially for you !”)

Moreover it’s not just *lack* of feeling in those feeble re-enactment movies that sells the reality of NDEs short. The feeling they *do* convey actually does violence to what I believe to be the most significant feature of the experience, for they suggest going *away* from this world and this life to find the heavenly light and love in some other realm, whereas the life-changes that have impressed even hard-nosed skeptics into taking NDEs seriously happen because experiencers find their eyes have been opened to light and love *right here*, in the world to which they return on resuscitation. The genius of Weir’s film is that he *starts* from this fact and makes it the main focus of his story; he builds up to the time-stopping climax as the *explanation* of the extraordinary way Max has been changed by what seems, at the beginning, like nothing more than the shock of relief at having survived.

From interviews with Weir in the media, I gather he hasn’t himself had an NDE, and I know nothing about the author of the novel on which the screenplay was based, but between them, the folks responsible for *Fearless* must have done some pretty extensive homework on the subject. The film reveals facts about near-death experiences that are very little known outside the (still fairly small) circle of people around the world doing professional research in the field. For starters, it’s still not at all widely realized that all the classic experiences which make the headlines when people are resuscitated from the brink of clinical death—disappearance of fear and pain, feelings of blissful peace, slowing-down or total stoppage of time, even the famous tunnel and encounter with celestial beings and heavenly light—can also occur to people who, like the film’s Max, narrowly *avoid* death without being sick or damaged in any way.

In fact one of the very first serious studies in this whole area was made by a Swiss alpine climber named Albert Heim back in the 1890s, who fell off a cliff to what seemed like certain death, only to land on soft snow with very minor injuries. As he went down, time seemed to become infinitely extended, fear vanished, and he experienced wonderful colors and music, plus a panoramic review of his life right from childhood, with a sense that even his nastiest acts were now somehow accepted without being in any way whitewashed. He was moved to write a scientific paper about it when he found many other mountaineers had similar experiences, but this received little if any attention outside Switzerland, and wasn’t translated into English until Professor Russell Noyes of the University of Iowa did so in the 1970s, after Raymond Moody had begun to draw attention to NDEs experienced in clinical situations.

Even then very little attention was paid to this kind of near-death experience, because journalists—and for that matter most professional researchers—were concerned mainly with finding possible evidence of a soul that could survive the body's death, which meant concentrating attention on people who might actually have *been* dead for a short time, as in the movie, *Flatliners*. Australian sociologist Alan Kellahear, now at La Trobe University, played a major role in drawing attention to the similarity between clinical NDEs and the experiences of people in crisis-situations like shipwrecks and air disasters. In *Fearless*, however, this is one of the major plotlines. The movie's climax is the revelation that Max's strange post-crash behavior—an apparently total loss of fear, disappearance of a long-standing allergy, an aversion to any form of lying even for "good causes," estrangement from his wife and son while feeling great love for another crash survivor who's deranged at the loss of her baby—are due to his having experienced in the crash the same "moment of death" that recurs weeks later when he comes close to clinical death through the return of his allergy.

The moral ambiguity of Max's post-crash behavior, which is the film's *main* plotline, brings out another feature of NDEs that doesn't get much discussed. Here again, researchers in the 1970s and early 1980s had an agenda that led them to bypass important facts. They were anxious to establish that NDEs weren't just hallucinations produced by disturbed brains, so they were at pains to demonstrate, by means of interviews and psychological tests, that experiencers showed no signs of mental sickness, but were actually living healthier, more creative lives than before. The impression created was one of "all sweetness and light," until in 1988 housewife-researcher Phyllis Atwater of Idaho, blew the whistle in her book *Coming Back to Life*, by showing that healthier and more creative living often involved upsetting conventional domestic and social appercarts.

Yes, experiencers do indeed come back with new spiritual drive and urge towards a better world, but that often means preferring poverty to dull jobs that would keep families in the style to which they're accustomed, helping strangers rather than going to neighborhood cocktail parties, and looking at scenery for hours instead of taking Junior to Little League. *Fearless* explores this issue with enormous sensitivity, showing how Max's changed behavior—sometimes generous beyond all expectation, but sometimes apparently foolhardy or even cruel—springs from his inability to countenance the compromises with fearful self-protection that are involved in even the "happiest" marriages and the most "regular guy" lifestyles.

In that timeless moment of the crash, he has experienced the wonder of infinite Aliveness which gets continually blocked out in so-called normal life by fearful evasion of any facts we've been taught to find unpleasant. As a consequence, Max rescues several other passengers from the wreck in a way which they and observers consider heroic, though to him it really is, as he insists, nothing special. Yet the same "fearlessness" later leads him to take risks that could harm people, both physical risks like crashing a car to jerk one of his fellow-survivors out of her irrational guilt about the fact that her baby was killed and she lived, and social risks like challenging the routine evasions practiced by insurance agents in getting the best payout for crash victims.

For Weir, however, the exploration of these moral ambiguities is more than just a human drama; what makes the film a work of genius rather than just a fine movie is the way he uses the story of Max's perplexing behavior to introduce viewers gradually, step by step, to the experience of timelessness at the climax. First, he joins some of those earlier makers of NDE re-enactments in employing slow-motion photography, just to get us used to the idea of time-sense being changed. In Max's first and second flashbacks to the crash, we see how his rescue of other passengers was indeed no heroic *defiance* of fear, but something he could do quite naturally because time has slowed down for him, enabling him to see how to avoid falling debris etc. For me, this echoed the story of a friend of mine who performed a similar rescue

of a mate from a blazing tank in World War II, and is equally anxious to repudiate any idea that he was heroic. Such experiences are by no means uncommon, even outside the NDE literature.

However, there's an added twist in Weir's presentation of the rescue scene which I wonder if I may perhaps be the *only* viewer to appreciate. As the plane breaks up all around, Max picks up a baby and then calls out to the passengers who are still relatively unhurt, "Follow me towards the light!" This apparently straightforward directive about how they can get safely out of the wreckage takes on highly symbolic significance when, in the final climactic flashback to the scene, the long body of the plane through which Max leads them becomes identified with the tunnel of his allergy-NDE. Since he clearly wasn't asking the others to follow him to the light of heaven beyond the grave, but taking them back to life on earth, Weir seems to be anticipating my own hypothesis (which I've never seen advanced by anyone else, and haven't yet published outside Australia) that the tunnel-to-the-light-phenomenon in NDEs is a discovery of "heavenliness" as the true nature of *this* world when it's perceived without the veil of fear. And since it's *timeless* heavenliness, the question of whether it continues *after* physical death is entirely secondary.

Weir keeps giving hints of Max's "heavenly" experience of the world all through the film—for example, in the way he finds the buildings of San Francisco fascinating when others don't even notice them, and is truly at a loss to understand how his fellow-survivor (the girl whose baby was killed) fails to see what he sees. Another example is his description of being free from society's entanglements because death brings freedom and he feels he's already dead. Some notable statements to this effect have been made by real-life near-death experiencers: one that comes most immediately to mind is the great pioneer of humanistic and transpersonal psychology, Abraham Maslow, who described the blissful calm he experienced in the two years he lived on after his near-fatal heart attack in 1968 as "my posthumous life."

But here again Weir introduces a twist which resonates with my own experience in a way I've not seen mentioned anywhere else in the NDE literature. Max tells the girl survivor as they walk through the San Francisco streets that they're invisible to the crowds, "because we're ghosts." I dreamed exactly that on Good Friday of 1984, not long after I'd arrived in Sydney in the wake of the NDE just before Christmas. It was such a remarkable dream that I published a paper about it in an American psychological journal, but I can't imagine it was read by anyone involved in making *Fearless*.

The most interesting thing of all about the film as a whole for me, however, is the way it explores what I have come to see as the \$64,000 question—why is it that something like a close brush with death is normally needed for the heavenliness of the world to be experienced? (and even that only works in only a minority of cases!) The film's answer, if I understand it right, seems to be that the natural biological fear-response seems to have gotten out of hand in the human species, to the point where it governs the whole organization of social life down to the minutest detail, blocking out aliveness in the process. For the fortunate minority, coming close to death unravels the knot, but then we have the problem of finding out how to organize practical affairs with fear as life's servant rather than its master, something about which even the world's greatest mystics and religious teachers have left us only very partial blueprints.

NDEs are often spoken of as rebirths; mine felt more like a resurrection, because I was reconstructed with all my past experience, but with the fear-response now operating "to one side," as it were, so that for most of the time I can heed it rationally but not be run by it. For Max, however, the process seems to have been incomplete, in that he doesn't seem able to handle fear at all without it taking over and removing his pearl of great price, which of course he won't allow. I find in his story a quite uncanny parallel, in modern secular Western terms,

to what happened in real-life history at the beginning of our century to the South Indian sage Ramana Maharshi, widely acknowledged as probably the most truly “enlightened” mystic of recent centuries.

Though not at all given to religious life, he came to recognize in his late teens that fear was in some fundamental way keeping him from really living, so he put himself through what might be describes as an artificial NDE. He emerged from it completely aware of the heavenly aliveness in all being, but quite unable to cope with routine living along the line of time. Because he lived in Hindu culture, where such consciousness-changes are understood and catered for, he was promptly surrounded by devotees who looked after him almost like a child for seventeen years, simply for the privilege of being in his presence and hearing what few observations he chose to make about reality. Towards the end of that time he began to have anoxial fits, and after one of these he suddenly emerged able to cope, with delightful ease and simplicity and astonishing efficiency—the state known in Hindu philosophy as *sahaj samādhi*. It was as if the resurrection-process had only gone halfway with his artificial NDE, but now it had completed itself.

I can't help wondering if the film isn't saying that Max too experienced only a half-resurrection process because in the crash he, like Ramana, didn't actually come to the point of real death. In the film's climax, his inability to cope with society's fear-organized conventions does indeed cause fear to overwhelm him, making his allergy return and really take him to the dying-point—and when his wife saves him by mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, he comes back out of that tunnel saying “I'm alive!” in an entirely new tone of voice and with a new look of “solid” aliveness which I find a triumph both of acting and direction. Are we to conclude that now the resurrection-process has gone to term, leaving him able to be in the world of compromise without being compromised? And if so, will he stay with his wife and child or not?

I don't know, and maybe when you see the film you'll have your own views about what its ending means. Meantime, I hope I've said enough to make clear that it's not to be missed on any account

NOTES

The remarkable story of Abraham Maslow and his “post-mortem life” is told in *The Right to be Human* by New York psychologist Edward Hoffman, one of the best biographies I've ever come across. Ramana Maharshi's story can be found in Sir Arthur Osborne's *The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi*. A good introduction to NDE research, which incidently is very clear about the way they often disrupt marriages, is Cherie Sutherland's *Transformed by the Light*, and it gives all the necessary references for you to read further. My own book about what one person's “resurrection-life” feels like, *The 9.15 to Nirvana*, is currently in press.