



Researching in the RERC Archive

Dr Mark Fox

Introduction

'Researching in the RERC Archive' is a very appropriate title for a paper commemorating the 50th anniversary of Sir Alister Hardy's establishment of the Religious Experience Research Centre. But how to begin? Actually, the real question is: where to *stop*?! At the very least, I take the title to involve at least *some* degree of reflection on what it was like to actually *do* that research. What it *felt* like to work within the archive and what impact the discoveries I made had on me, the researcher. In fact, at the outset I realise that I have never actually done that. So I am going to try to do it now, at least to an extent, whilst quoting quite liberally from archival material: for there is no better way to describe what it is like to research in the RERC archive than to hear some accounts at first hand, unfiltered by the researcher and presented as they were written.

Near-Death Experiences and the Common Core

My first extended examination of the RERC archive began almost exactly twenty years ago, as part of an attempt to *overturn* the contention of many NDE researchers that there was a common core to Near-Death Experiences which included an overwhelming sense of bliss and peace, an out-of-body experience, a trip through darkness, an encounter with light, a judgement, an order to return, disappointment at waking up, and so on.

Before I began, I was convinced that many of the early NDE researchers had imposed a false uniformity on the testimonies that they were examining: a 'false consistency' which had in turn 'skewed' the field for those that followed. Perhaps there were no such things as Near-Death Experiences at all, and it was all a horrible mistake: wrought, in large part, by the misleading and methodologically-suspect early work of Raymond Moody, Kenneth Ring, Michael Sabom et al and extending right through to

more recent times (Moody 1975, Ring 1980, Sabom 1982). Using NDE and NDE-like accounts I found in the archive I sought to test the accuracy or even the very existence of the core that they had presented; thinking that I'd probably find enough material to overturn it. I certainly wasn't looking for commonality to 'outweigh' diversity. Quite the opposite, in fact. In the event, I found a consistency that I wasn't looking for and thought I wouldn't find. To be sure, not to the extent that Moody and the others had claimed. But it was there.

And this was the first thing that the unique and wonderful RERC archive permitted me to do. Because many of the people who had such experiences and wrote them down and sent them to Sir Alister did so before the term 'Near-Death Experience' even existed. Before there was anything like the current widespread expectation that this is what happens at the point of death. Yet there it was. Just a tiny part of Sir Alister's rich archival legacy. Confirmation that near death (and sometimes far from it) people really *do* have experiences that include episodes of darkness, lights, feelings of bliss and peace, and self-seeing. They use a wide variety of terms to describe these things, and even my use of a phrase like 'episodes of darkness' is interpretation-rich, but commonality there is. Or at least there is in the archive; suggesting that it exists outside of the archive too. I was surprised (Fox 2003).

Archival Accounts

I was surprised, too, by the richness and detail of many of the accounts I came across. Being my first proper exploration in the archive, I did not quite know what to expect. There follows one of the very earliest experiences submitted to the RERC (when it was known as the Religious Experience Research Unit), in which the subject described how:

While making rapid recovery 14 days after one of [my] heart attacks, I suddenly had a complete cardiac arrest, when, (I was told), the E.C.G reading showed at least a 5 minutes clinical 'death'. (My family have seen the ECG graph taken at the time.)

Eventually a feeble flicker of a heart beat was nurtured electrically until the heart was able to carry on. During this time, while I was 'out for the count', I recall thinking to myself 'This is *it* – Death.' And 'looked around' to see straight ahead a bright light, sending warmth and benevolence, shaped like a crucifix with an additional cross superimposed diagonally. Elsewhere was darkness, and from my body, which seemed to be on some kind of catafalque, all pain and feeling melted away.

The light did not illuminate much more than my body's length away, but I was aware of a kind of screen to my right. I felt no fear, only a tranquility I'd never known before, nor did I recall any thought of relatives or life on earth. Only my brain seemed to have feeling, and I relaxed into sheer ecstasy, feeling I did not ever wish to leave this state.

There was no sense of time, no thoughts of anything in particular in my mind.

Then from behind the screen on my right, I heard soft footsteps and as they approached, the light grew brighter, and as it grew, a feeling of great joy within me. Was I at last to know the truth and meet the 'Living God'? But, alas, before the footsteps reached the end of the screen, I awoke to see the blurred face of a nurse above me, my wife at my bedside and all the trappings of sudden cardiac failure 'at the ready'.

The feeling as those footsteps approached was as if my 'inner self' was at last to meet someone who understood me, could guarantee tranquillity, judge me correctly and whose integrity I could respect and admire (RERC 000427).

This most interesting account calls for some comment before we proceed. There are very many like it in the archive – numbering in the thousands, in fact. Not all taking place near death or containing the same features, but nearly all as striking. From its numbering within the archive it is also possible to date approximately when it was written and sent in – which is how I knew it could be dated to a time before the term 'Near-Death Experience' existed. And here the *uniqueness* of the archive begins to reveal itself. For where else could a researcher find a significant number of experiences that occurred before their common features had become widely known? Permitting, perhaps, a researcher to test the hypothesis that expectation creates experience by opening up to him or her a number of experiences that occurred in the absence of such expectation? Virtually everybody today knows that at or near the point of death a consistent number of *motifs* are commonly reported by persons who survive. They did not know that in 1970, when the above account was written down. Here is another relatively early account, submitted on 21st January 1972, describing an experience that occurred in June 1944:

I was severely injured in a flying bomb incident. At the moment of impact I lost consciousness, regaining it only for brief spells during the next few days. Whether or not I was conscious at the particular time I would like to describe to you I cannot say but I felt as if I was slipping away, rather than dying, I mean, & could not hold on to life any longer (if that sounds contradictory, I am sorry, but it does convey how I felt). Suddenly I was aware of a brilliant coloured glow of light & it was as [if] I was somehow being reassured. It was as though something, someone, a presence

was reaching out to me but above all I was filled with a feeling of exquisite peace.

When I was able to hold a conversation after the first few days I told my father about my experience & he said that on the day of my accident he received a telegram from the hospital asking him to come at once because I was not expected to live more than a few hours. I mention this because, until my father told me, I had no idea that I was dying & therefore would have had no preconceived ideas (RERC 002446).

Here, the experience confounds expectation not simply in the sense that the subject could have had no familiarity with the then non-existent literature on Near-Death Experiences but also in the sense that he did not know that he was near death. We will have more to say about expectation and experience later.

Lightforms and The Fifth Love

As a result of the kindness and inspiration of a generous donor, I was able to undertake a second study within the RERC archive very shortly after completing the first. Here, I examined the considerably greater number of archival accounts containing a variety of light *motifs*, whether reported at the point of death or not. My brief was to see if there was a 'common core' and once more I anticipated greater diversity than unity but yet again I discovered the opposite: that there was a 'common core' which extended right through from the contexts of light-experiences all the way to their fruits. I present the results of my research in my book *Lightforms* but, in essence, what I discovered after examining over 700 accounts of unusual lights within the archive was that typically, persons in states of deep crisis – both physical and emotional – were reaching a point of extreme or maximum distress. At that point, when they felt they just could not continue, they encountered an unusual light. To be sure, it took various forms – hence the title *Lightforms* – and occupied various locations. It could displace the person's existing background, appear, as it were, superimposed upon it, or take a different form such as a beam, ray or shaft. But whatever form it took it seemed to represent a turning-point within the person's experience, triggering major life-changes and remaining unforgettable. Typical fruits of such an experience included a decreased fear of death, a developing awareness of the existence of spiritual realities, or the acquisition of new (usually spiritually-meaningful) hobbies or interests. (Fox 2008). Once again, I was surprised. So, too, were many of the subjects whose accounts I read. In the vast majority of cases they were not expecting to have the experiences they had. Nor could they adequately explain them in conventional terms, as the following account makes clear:

The mistress of the house had the task of telling me my brother had been killed in Italy. This was naturally a terrible shock...

That same evening I went to bed as usual in a bungalow attached to the main building. It was a dark night & the employers had gone out to a party so the main house was in darkness...

Suddenly there was a misty ball of light over towards the door of my room...this door opened on to the garden & in any case my employers were all out for the evening. My mind seemed to 'change gear'. I use car terminology to suggest a change of normal activity difficult if not impossible to describe. It was as if a voice spoke in my head 'Don't worry any more about [your brother,] he is quite well and happy.' On hearing this I suddenly felt quite relaxed after the great emotional storm of the day. I have never since then worried about the after-life & have been content to leave it in God's hands. During my years of agnosticism I have often recalled and tried to explain the foregoing experience to myself in terms of 'hysteria', 'overwrought imagination' etc. But today at age 40 I am convinced it was real, true, & not to be explained away. That it was a message to me for comfort and inspiration (RERC 000982).

No sooner had I finished the *Lightforms* project than another generous donor made possible my third and final study within the archive: one involving experiences of overwhelming, transcendent, love. Once again, I found a 'common core'. One, in fact, that bore more than a passing resemblance to the one I had previously found during the light research. And all the time this sense of subjects being *surprised* by their experiences. Surprised by light. Surprised by love. Surprised by joy: often in the midst of despair (Fox 2014).

“Words Scratch”

So, after having conducted three studies and having read about a third of the accounts in the archive I came to a number of conclusions and two in particular. Firstly, there was more patterning – commonality – to experiences than I had previously supposed. And secondly, very many of the persons who wrote to Sir Alister and whose accounts constituted the archive I was examining were describing episodes that they *did not* expect to have. And their experiences did not simply reflect their culture or fulfil their expectations. Far less were they a product of their *language*. In fact, time and time again I saw language *break down*: a limiter, not a facilitator. Far less a creator or a determiner. The following account illustrates this rather well. The respondent was

trying to describe an experience he had in World War One when he was injured by an exploding mine:

Words are so limiting. How can they describe this burning confrontation which is as vivid today as it was fifty-odd years ago? I try to make little comparisons with worldly joys, but these are so trivial. Relaxing in a warm bath after a hard game; swimming at night in a phosphorescent tropic sea; finding the trail again after being lost in the jungle; seeing light at the end of long research; waking pain-free after an operation; being helped in my gardening by a friendly blackbird; listening to the Sahara as it settled for the night after a day's searing heat – such glimpses of the underlying peace which accompanies Love's release from fear or stress can come to all of us. They bring assurance to those who think. They wake joy, but are only faint echoes of my out-of-time communion with the heart of joy itself in ecstasy of becoming, the new birth (RERC 002817).

Or, as another of Sir Alister's respondents wrote when trying to convey her frustration at being unable to adequately describe what happened to her: "words scratch."

That religious experiences confound language was one of the most striking conclusions that my archival research permitted me to draw. It goes very much against the current academic 'grain' too, I know. For it has become a commonplace within the academy to see religious and spiritual experiences as being in some (usually unspecified) sense shaped – or even created – by the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their subjects. My research strongly suggests the opposite. In fact, in the light of it, I would respectfully suggest that a challenge beckons: an ideal one for any budding constructivist who wants to test my findings for himself. Pick a *motif* or a series of such, go to the archive, and have a look. You may end up being as surprised as I was.

Religious Experiences?

More than constructs, then; more than mirrors. Might we call these experiences *religious*? In a 1951 lecture entitled *Science and the Quest for God*, given at Essex Hall and sponsored by the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, Sir Alister said this:

I do not wish to disturb or hurt the feelings of those who have certain fixed convictions, nor to try to convert them to a different point of view. I cannot, however, help feeling that it is likely to be more important for religion in the future to have a theology that is founded on the reality of

religious experience, than to have one that builds its doctrines on supposed events in the past: supposed events which some of the best scholars of history are unable to establish beyond doubt by the rules of evidence accepted in other fields of historical research (Hay 2011: 200).

A Study of Religions scholar may balk at Sir Alister's use of the word 'religion' in the singular here but the overall point is still clear: a theology based on experience was something that he saw as important and as becoming *increasingly* important – perhaps even desirable – when he gave his lecture. In that way, religion could be preserved: particularly at a time when its historical and doctrinal roots had been weakened by decades of critical enquiry.

And here we are: nearly seven decades on. Were his words prescient? Prophetic, even? The answers to those questions would require complex analysis and would take us far away from the focus of this paper. On the one hand, he was *surely* correct. A religion based on the reality of religious experience is surely to a significant extent impervious to the vagaries of historical enquiry. But as a result of my own research within the archive I have steadily come to the conclusion that it would be difficult – nigh-on impossible, in fact – to establish any kind of *religion* on what I found. Save, perhaps, for a rather vague universalism in which everyone can be the recipient of the sort of grace vouchsafed to those grateful persons who found love and light in the midst of their darkness.

In fact, this was another striking finding. Spiritual experience seems to be no respecter of doctrinal, denominational, or religious boundaries. Rather, it *transcends* religions: seemingly equally at home in all of them and none. In one of the most striking accounts I came across, the subject of her experience puts this well:

I came from the kitchen into the bedroom, sat at my dressing table, opened a drawer and began to do something quite ordinary, I can't remember what, when I was suddenly overwhelmed by the presence of God. I was absolutely astounded. I hadn't known there was a God at all. Having rejected the Roman Catholicism of my childhood while still in my teens, I was pretty much an atheist or agnostic and had no interest in religion. I had no such thoughts at the time, however. I was just shattered, shaken to the roots of my being...(RERC 004581).

Now, the reader might think it a pretty odd sort of Roman Catholicism if it never introduced this lady to the idea of God. Perhaps that's why she left it behind. Nonetheless, her point is clear, and she expresses it vividly and well: I'm not a religious person. I wasn't doing religious things. I had no religious beliefs whatsoever at the time of my experience. I wasn't even interested in religion. But it happened. And I was never the same again. In fact, she stresses this last point almost at the very end of her testimony, as she concludes:

[My experience] changed my life radically...I did not return to church; nothing seemed more obvious to me than that the Churches had no idea what they were playing with...[But] I am as convinced now...as I was during those astonished days immediately following the experience. Indeed, I am still astonished sometimes. Why should there be a God? I can think of no convincing *reasons*. And a personal God at that! It all seems so unlikely! Then I am astonished all over again (RERC 004581).

A Dazzling Darkness

And yet...and yet...having said this there is *still* something in these accounts of something sacred. A sense that we are treading on holy ground when we hear or read them. A sense that we are being confronted by a sacred presence. An odour of sanctity; but one involving all of the senses. And none. There are very many examples that I could have used to illustrate this, but one will suffice. I came across it when researching for my light project. The subject writes:

As far back as I can remember there has been a sweet, cool presence in and around me – someone called it a Dazzling Darkness. This varies in intensity. It is in everything and is always there. On the rare occasions when it *has* receded I've felt frightened and alone. It is in me, it knows about me and I belong to it, but it is not a Person, so that praying in words seems crude. I prefer to 'inhale it' at prayer time, or at quiet moments in the day. I find this presence strongly in old churches, some old houses, in wild countryside, music, and in a few people. About 3 times it has intensified into what I suppose could be the mystical experience – a pinkish golden light which was in everything, was love, and made everything look beautiful, even Council Houses and a Corporation bus (RERC 000489).

This account, another one of the very earliest submitted to the archive, typifies many. The presence is often there although sometimes it recedes. 'It' is not really an 'it', but not a person either. There is something extra- or supra-linguistic about it so that all attempts to pray in words appear, to the subject, crude. Rather, this Dazzling Darkness is best inhaled; although even there the writer has put 'inhaled' in inverted commas. Certain spaces seem to embody or to convey it: sacred *and* profane. Occasionally it becomes intensified to the point of visibility, and that's when everything is transformed – even council buildings and a bus.

I often used to wonder about the subjects who sent their experiences to the archive. Who were they? What would it be like to meet them? Could I have picked them out in

a crowd? I always felt that I was handling something so special when I read what they had written. In fact, I often wondered if analysis of any kind was an appropriate thing to do with their accounts of what had happened to them. Did they really mean for anybody to categorize them in the way that I was doing? To put them under a sort of analytical microscope in a search for clues and common features? It never felt quite right. In fact, I usually tried to create some sort of sacred space when I was working directly with the testimonies. I'd put on Gregorian chant, light a candle, and say a prayer. *Can you sacralise a laboratory?* Well, I tried. And it may well have been easier in those days because I was, at least, handling paper. I'm not in the least denigrating the excellent work done on fully computerising the archive for search and retrieval purposes when I say that. I simply wonder what difference it makes when a researcher reads an experience on a screen, rather than in some other, older, form. The same when *writing* an experience down, come to that.

The Unexplored Continent

It has been an ongoing privilege to have been able to spend so long in the archive, working on the three projects which made possible my first three books. In closing, how might I *sum up* that experience? And how might we look forward to the next 50 years? How might the next five decades of research build on the foundations that the last five decades have laid? Given Sir Alister's own careers in zoological and spiritual exploration, it seems fitting to use the metaphor of exploration with respect to these questions.

As will have become clear, the RERC archive is *massive*. For that reason, it might usefully be compared to a huge and still largely unexplored *continent*. Whilst other comprehensive archival studies are ongoing it still remains likely that much of the archival collection remains to be discovered and mapped. As is well-known, Sir Alister had a particular sort of transcendent episode in mind when he sent out his original appeals for accounts, but he received many kinds of experiences that he was not looking for. In a collection of some of those accounts published in 1990, the authors used the image of a fisherman casting his net upon the waters and finding a great array of creatures: some expected and some unexpected (Maxwell and Tschudin 1990: 6). It is a good image: one reinforced when one considers the archive as a vast continent and not just a teeming sea. There is much here to *surprise* as well as to *reassure* the researcher: something that is due in no small part to the fact that Sir Alister acknowledged and catalogued every account of every experience that he received, leaving so much for other researchers to examine. Many of us have been the beneficiaries of his foresight and remain forever indebted both to the work that he accomplished and to the collection of accounts which he left for others to explore.

As with any unmapped and still largely hidden continent there is so much about the archive that we still don't know. Basic things; such as its size. This struck me most forcibly during my time spent there. Estimates of around 6000 accounts seem to have been derived from the numbers given to each account. But examination of what Sir Alister received as a result of his various appeals for experiences reveals that many respondents included several different descriptions of different episodes in any single letter to him. Some of those letters extend to several pages and some detail a lifetime of experiences. So the actual number of specific and separate experiences within the archive may be much higher. The harvest is there; ready, and the workers have been comparatively few. The simple fact is that we do not know the size of what is there before us. Perhaps one day we *will* know, although like any living thing our largely unexplored continent continues to expand as more accounts are added. There is much work still to be done. Like many pioneers, Sir Alister led the way but there are very many areas of this continent of this continent which await the arrival of others.

Part of the ongoing challenge of navigating and exploring this massive territory lies in its *uniqueness*. It really is a one-off. I know of nothing, anywhere, comparable to the RERC archive – even in this age of digitization and the internet. The archives of the SPR may well be the closest match but, in reality, even *they* are very different: concerned, as they are, with very different things. How, then, do we explore the vast continent of the RERC archive, given that there are no other comparable explorations to help us? The result of this particular challenge has been the ongoing development of new methodologies, particularly as regards the location and retrieval of the 'types' of experiences germane to any particular project. What is absolutely clear is that the challenge of exploring this massive continent has given impetus to new ways of thinking and doing as regards collecting, storing, retrieving, and analysing accounts of religious experience and that this, in turn, has served to locate ongoing work within the archive at the 'cutting edge' of contemporary research into spiritual and anomalous experience. An exciting prospect, as we stand on the threshold of the *next* fifty years of archival exploration.

A Risky Business

Of course, exploration of any kind can be a risky business. For me, research is about taking risks. That may mean challenging shibboleths; being methodologically incorrect, perhaps, or blazing entirely new trails. On the fiftieth anniversary of its founding, the archive stands before us – vast and still largely unexplored, yet ripe for harvest. T.S Kuhn reminds us that no new paradigm ever came about as a result of timidity or the shirking of challenges (Kuhn 1962). And this is the real risk – not to stay on the 'right side' of the line but to cross it. Why *do* the same motifs recur within NDE testimonies? Why do so many people have unusual experiences that confound their cultural-linguistic backgrounds and expectations? What might explain the 'common

core' to unusual experiences of light? How come there is so much unity-in-diversity in testimonies to overwhelming experiences of transcendent love? The reality that stands behind both the unity and the diversity may be too fleet of foot for our lumbering paradigms; rewarding the epistemologically incorrect, perhaps. But the archive provides rich opportunities for blazing new trails, as Sir Alister, a trail blazer extraordinaire, knew only too well.

Another ongoing challenge for any researcher tempted to explore this strange continent lies in what for want of a better word I shall call its 'otherness'. I am thinking here in particular of what any researcher may expect to find once his or her exploration is underway. Sir Alister knew full well what subsequent research has confirmed: that very many archival accounts can be put together and categorised into 'types'. A glance at *The Spiritual Nature of Man* and its classification of the first 3000 or so accounts provides ample testimony to this (Hardy 1979). But as I have already alluded to, there is a significant number of accounts that elude easy categorization and definition too: something that became very apparent to me when I was examining archival accounts of transcendent *love*. According to many respondents, these experiences are simply *ineffable*: *felt*, not understood, and certainly not 'name-able' or amenable to adequate, precise, definition. To complicate matters further still, many of the most unusual experiences in the archive appear to 'overlap' existing categories. An unusual experience of light, for example, may at the same time be usefully seen as a 'type' of religious vision or something even stranger, such as a poltergeist manifestation, as in the following example:

Not long ago I lived in a bungalow alone. One evening I made preparations as usual, about ten o'clock, to retire. I switched off the electricity at the mains leaving the place in total darkness. I went into the hall and bent down to lock the door. As I did so the hall was illumined with a soft light. Accompanied by a loud hissing. I stood up and turning around, saw a brilliant light, its edges flickering, and its centre in motion. I stood gazing at it for a period of fifteen or twenty seconds then it went taking with it the hiss and glow. I thought I had seen God.

That was the beginning of a series of phenomena continuing to this day. Soon after, occurring in the day and at night the bungalow shook under the concussion of terrific bangs upon one wall. One evening cooking in the kitchen I heard a loud bang from the dining room, and an intense feeling of being uplifted happened to me. I rushed into the dining room, but it was quite normal. Often phenomena have happened. If I listen at night I hear voices whispering around the room. I am not a religious conformist or a believer in Church dogma or ceremony, I believe that a mans home is his temple, and that love art beauty and home are the only things that matter (RERC 001093)

How might a researcher understand the ‘otherness’ of such an event, let alone try to classify or categorise it? Is he or she presented with the need to develop new categories or ‘types’ in such instances or is the entire utility of categorisation and classification called radically into question at such times? It is one thing to classify a *genus* or *species* in the natural world. Quite another to classify a ‘specimen’ from the supernatural world. Perhaps a whole new approach is called for. One that involves risk and which the next fifty years of archival research will develop, utilise, and present. Much of Sir Alister’s pioneering work was in this whole area of classification and it is exciting to see what he started being carried on by others: not least as regards the ‘fruits’ of such experiences.

The Next Fifty Years

Of course, no continent – however strange – is entirely ‘other’. As we have already had cause to note, the incredible land that Sir Alister did so much to trailblaze has turned out to be both unfamiliar *and* familiar. Students of religious experience who have yet to set foot upon this land will have no difficulty in identifying at least some of the reports he received: visions, feelings of unity, out-of-body and near-death experiences, voices, a sense of being guided, comforting presences, and so on. It has been the sense of being somewhere both familiar *and* unfamiliar that has most vividly characterised my time in this wonderful land. It is my hope that the next 50 years will allow us to see it all even more clearly.

References

- Fox, M. 2003. *Religion, Spirituality and the Near-Death Experience*. London: Routledge.
- Fox, M. 2008. *Spiritual Encounters with Unusual Light Phenomena: Lightforms*. Cardiff, University of Wales Press.
- Fox, M. 2014. *The Fifth Love: Exploring Accounts of the Extraordinary*. Kidderminster: Spirit and Sage.
- Hardy, A. 1979. *The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hay, D. 2011. *God's Biologist: A Life of Sir Alister Hardy*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Kuhn, T. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Maxwell, M. and Tschudin, V. 1990. *Seeing the Invisible: Modern Religious and Other Transcendent Experiences*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Moody, R. 1975. *Life After Life*. Atlanta: Mockingbird.
- Ring, K. 1980. *Life at Death: A Scientific Investigation of the Near-Death Experience*. New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan.
- Sabom, M. 1982. *Recollections of Death: A Medical Investigation*. London: Corgi.

Archival account numbers are given in brackets.

Mark Fox's website is at www.markfox.co.uk. His books can be obtained there or from amazon.co.uk.