

Heaven Is Beautiful

HOW DYING TAUGHT ME THAT DEATH IS JUST THE BEGINNING

"From the first morning after my near-death experience I have felt an inner compulsion to tell about it. I locked that compulsion inside me, but in there it grew stronger and stronger and demanded to be told, but I was a rebellious sort and refused. I feel that I must tell it now."

— Peter Baldwin Panagore

SYNOPSIS

In the winter of 1980, college senior Peter Baldwin Panagore went ice climbing on the world-famous Lower Weeping Wall, along the Ice Fields Parkway in Alberta, Canada. His climbing partner was an experienced ice climber, but Panagore was a novice. On their descent, they became trapped on the side of the mountain. As the sun set, Peter was overcome by exhaustion and hypothermia. He died on the side of the mountain in March 1980. In his minutes on the other side, he experienced hell, forgiveness, and unconditional love. Heaven, reports Peter, was beautiful. His near death experience (NDE) changed his life and resulted in an intense spiritual journey that continues.

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BIOGRAPHY



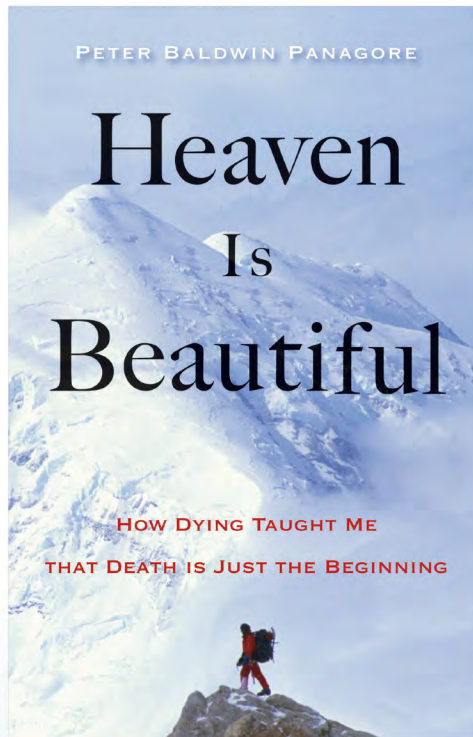
Peter Baldwin Panagore is the host of a daily two-minute inspirational radio broadcast on two NBC stations throughout

Maine. Peter is an avid sailor, expert skier, and woods trail runner who earned his BA in English from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and an M. Div. from Yale Divinity School, with a focus on systematic theology and Christian mysticism. His educational background and his 30 years of yoga and meditative practice and his work as a pastor with the dying and grieving has given Peter a unique insight, language, and perspective on heaven, God, death, life, love, beauty, and hope. The retired pastor, who has written for *The*

Huffington Post, lives in coastal Maine with his wife.

SOCIAL MEDIA

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A Conversation with Peter Panagore

WHAT WAS IT ABOUT ICE CLIMBING THAT DREW YOU AND TIM TO THE LOWER WEeping WALL IN THE FIRST PLACE?

I craved the wilderness far away from civilization. For me the trip was really about the backcountry skiing adventure of living in snow caves and in a remote cabin. It was winter wilderness camping. It was all Boy Scout type of stuff—the stuff I loved and did since childhood. (I was a Heart ranked Scout and in the Brotherhood in the Order of the Arrow when I was 15 or 16). The ice climb was the bigger challenge, an unknown. I like challenges. Climbing, for me, was about mental focus, clarity, and sharpness along with the calming and controlling of fear. Climbing was about courage. Weeping Wall was famous. Tim picked it.

YOU DEVELOPED A SERIOUS STUTTER AFTER YOUR NDE. HOW DID YOU EXPLAIN IT TO PEOPLE?

I didn't really have to explain stuttering for months because I only spoke in American Sign Language. I was a troupe member of the Theatre of Silence—a Montana State University touring company for the deaf. On the first day of class, auditions were announced for the ten-week spring tour. I auditioned as a silent clown and was accepted. Planning and rehearsals began immediately. ASL was required for the show and came easily to me. Our show was departing on a ten week, 64 performance western tour that spanned 24,000 miles, just two weeks after my return from Canada. Everyone spoke ASL. So, to control my stutter, I spoke in American Sign Language. By June I had calmed down enough to have some control over my tongue.

YOU ATTENDED YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL NOT TOO LONG AFTER YOUR TRIP. WHAT WERE YOU HOPING TO FIND THERE?

I hoped to find people like me among and inside of the ancient books of mystical and contemplative writings. I went to find God, or to find how to find God, or understand what had happened to me. I also went to Yale to delay a possible novitiate at Saint Joseph's Trappist Monastery, where my spiritual advisor (Father Theophane Boyd) lived and taught. I told myself that I needed to explore the idea of being a Protestant before submerging into a life of prayer, meditation, chanting, silence, work, and contemplation, like in a Catholic monastery. There was also woman involved and I wasn't certain that I could handle celibacy. I was right about that.

In my senior year at UMass I took a class called Comparative Contemplative Mystical Literature East and West. Based on the readings in that course, I went to Yale, because I believed that I could learn about myself by reading more deeply in the ancient writings of the masters of western mysticism. I was right about that.

YOU HAVE READ ONLY ONE OTHER BOOK ABOUT NDE. WHAT WAS IT AND WHY NO OTHERS?

Actually I read two books. The first was while I was at Yale. My wife handed me Raymond Moody's *Reflections on Life After Life*. She thought that it would help me. It was the first time I learned that there were others like me. I tracked Moody down and called him up. I told him my story. He told me that it was very likely that I had an NDE.

Decades later, as people began to urge me to write my story, I realized that the best way to tell my story was

to never read any one else's NDE story otherwise I'd be influenced by their thinking, their words, their ideas, and their experiences. I thought, and still think, that it is better if my story is judged on its own merits. In preparing for the sale of my manuscript I skimmed the market of NDE books, as instructed by my literary agent. I told my agent that I wasn't going to read a single book for the reasons I just stated. We agreed that I would skim and skip very lightly through the genre. But when I read a brief on *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven*, I knew something wasn't right, so I read that book. It was plain to me that he had not had an NDE. We NDE people—we all know each other when we hear each other's stories—there are common elements and common truths, and we can tell who has and who hasn't been through this.

YOUR STORY MUST BE INCREDIBLY COMFORTING TO PEOPLE CLOSE TO DEATH AND THEIR LOVED ONES — ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO FEAR DEATH AND DYING.

It is comforting. It is because of my unshakable certainty, and because I am not interested if anyone believes me or not. I am not trying to convince anyone of anything. That's God's job. Everyone will find out at the moment of death. Sitting by many beds, holding many hands, and saying many prayers with the dying and the grieving was a calling. I feel like a reverse midwife, but instead of catching a baby on its entrance here, I was there—I am there—to lend a hand, a word, a heart, and a truth to ease their transition to the other side.

