TOUCHED BY THE LIGHT

Exploring Spiritually
Transformative Experiences

YVONNE KASON, M.D.



DUNDURN
TORONTO

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Dedicated to the memory of
Pandit Gopi Krishna,
and
Paramahansa Yogananda.
Lights in the Darkness

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INTRODUCTION

MANY PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD are having Spiritually Transformative Experiences (STEs). I know this first-hand — I have had many STEs myself. When I was in medical school in 1976, I had what I now know was a kundalini awakening experience. Then, when I was a medical resident in 1979, I had a life-changing mystical "Near-Death Experience" (NDE) in an airplane crash, followed by a psychic awakening a few weeks later. My struggle to understand my own extraordinary experiences propelled me on a quest, as a medical doctor and a psychotherapist, to research mystical and paranormal experiences. I wanted to discover what was known by medicine, psychology, and spiritual traditions about mystical experiences, Near-Death Experiences, and psychic phenomena, and to share this awareness with others.

Touched by the Light is the product of forty years of inner and outer research. Over the years more and more people came forward to speak to me as a doctor and psychotherapist about their STEs, especially after 1990 when I publicly specialized my medical practice on the research and counselling of persons having STEs. To this day, close to a thousand persons have shared the stories of their powerful STEs with me: mystical experiences, Near-Death Experiences, Spiritual Energy or Kundalini Episodes, inspired creative experiences, and psychic awakenings. I've studied my own STEs over this time as well, and researched the scholarly literature, exchanged insights with other consciousness researchers, and learned from teachers of both Eastern and Western spiritual traditions.

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I coined the phrase Spiritually Transformative Experiences in 1994, as an umbrella term to encompass this broad range of experiences happening to people today, which all tend to cause a "spiritual awakening" in the experiencer — changing the experiencer's values and attitudes in a more spiritual and altruistic direction. Additionally, STEs of all types also seem to share similar long-term after-effects. STEs often seem to begin (or accelerate) a long-term process of transformation in body, mind, and spirit. As you will read, these STE after-effects, this long-term process of psychological purification, spiritual deepening, and expansion of the range of consciousness, is known of in various spiritual traditions, where it has been called the "mystical path" or "kundalini process."

Unfortunately, until now Western medicine, psychology, and society as a whole have been uninformed about Near-Death Experiences, kundalini awakening, mystical experiences and other STEs, and their prevalence among people today. At the time of my 1979 NDE, even good friends and medical colleagues invalidated my experience, and speculated that my NDE was an "electrolyte imbalance" or a "hallucination." I knew this could not be true of an experience that was so intensely positive and had such a powerful, lasting impact upon me.

My personal understanding of Near-Death Experiences was deepened dramatically in 1995 when I had another out-of-body mystical experience in a close call — another powerful Near-Death Experience. Then to my further amazement, in 2003 I had yet another life-changing white-light Near-Death Experience, when I sustained a traumatic brain injury in a slip-and-fall accident.

In *Touched by the Light* I am sharing the conclusions from my forty-year quest to understand STEs — a framework and vocabulary to define the major types of STEs and their many subtypes, and a framework to understand the after-effects — physical, psychological, paranormal, and spiritual — using many actual case stories and several of my own STE stories as examples. I am also sharing the model I have found most helpful in understanding STEs and their after-effects, the yogic model of consciousness and kundalini. This framework is based on a blend of Gopi Krishna's contemporary interpretation of ancient yogic concepts about kundalini, yogic science as recently described for the West by Paramahansa

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Yogananda, and the insights of myself and other consciousness researchers. This yogic framework is universal and multi-faith, bridging Eastern and Western thought, as well as medicine and spirituality. It is the best framework I have found to understand STEs and their common after-effects — the biological, psychological, and spiritual symptoms of long-term spiritual transformation of consciousness.

This book is a guide for those people having STEs and undergoing long-term spiritual transformation. I hope that by reading *Touched by the Light* they will realize that they are not alone, that their STEs are real and are also being experienced by many people today, and that STEs have been known for millennia in the mystical traditions of the world's major faiths. I offer such individuals some practical guidelines for navigating many years of the transformation process, which may at times be tumultuous, requiring intense psycho-spiritual housecleaning, but which yields beautiful spiritual results and equipoise in the end.

Touched by the Light is also a guide for health-care professionals, clergy, and counsellors to whom STE experiencers may turn for help and support. My hope is to give professionals a framework for understanding STEs and their after-effects, so they can better assess and assist their clients.

I also hope this synthesis of both my personal STE experiences and forty years of clinical experience and research will stimulate other STE researchers. Large numbers of people are having STEs and are undergoing spiritual transformation of consciousness. I think it essential that more research be done to better document and understand these experiences, and to learn how to best assist and support persons having them. Professionals and the public need to become better informed about STEs, so that we stop mislabelling and pathologizing STE experiencers!

Finally, I sincerely hope that everyone reading this book will come away knowing that Spiritually Transformative Experiences are very real experiences — experiences that reveal to us that we are truly spiritual beings, not just physical bodies — spiritual beings incarnated here in physical bodies in order to grow, learn, and expand in our capacity to love.

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PART I

DEFINING SPIRITUALLY TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES

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MY 1979 PLANE-CRASH NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

MANY PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD today are having "Spiritually Transformative Experiences" (STEs), remarkable experiences of consciousness that have a strong positive psychological and spiritual effect on the individual. STEs tend to change the experiencer's values and beliefs in a more spiritual and more altruistic direction — a powerful STE causing what is often called a "spiritual awakening." A person's entire world view and their ideas, values, priorities, and beliefs may change. I have often heard people say after a powerful STE that their perception of reality — and their whole personality — has been transformed and propelled in a far more spiritual direction. For this reason I have come to call these powerful transforming experiences "Spiritually Transformative Experiences" (STEs), a phrase I coined in 1994.

I speak from personal experience. In 1979, when I was twenty-six years old, I had a powerful Spiritually Transformative Experience, a Near-Death Experience, which would change the course of my life forever. My childhood was fairly ordinary. My father and mother were both European immigrants who came to Canada to seek a better life after the brutality of the Second World War. I was born and raised — along with a sister and two brothers — in the pleasant, upper-middle-class suburbs of Toronto. Raised a Christian, I participated in Sunday School and, as a teenager, in the church choir of my local United Church of Canada. I believed in a God both because I had been taught to do so and because the belief gave me hope that the world — and humankind — might somehow survive its history of senseless violence and repeated wars.

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Because I was considered academically "gifted," I was placed in a special accelerated school program, Etobicoke Advancement Classes. One benefit of this was that I developed a tremendous love of reading. In high school during the late 1960s to early 1970s, I listened to the music of the Beatles, was introduced to the writings of Alan Watts and Timothy Leary, and became fascinated with their discussions of the so-called mystical states of consciousness that could be glimpsed through the use of hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD. But it quickly became clear to me that people should be able to reach these mystical states — if they did indeed represent some type of union with the Divine — without the use of drugs. This thought led me, like many others of my generation, to explore Eastern philosophies, meditation, and yoga.

During university and medical school I began to practise hatha yoga and to read books on positive thinking. In my last year of medical school, I took a meditation course that claimed that regular meditation would help me relax, study better, and get better grades in my exams. Being a dedicated medical student, I was eager to do well in my final examinations. I began to meditate daily. I took to meditation immediately. It felt natural to me, as if I were a duck being introduced to swimming on water for the first time.

In December 1976, after a few months of regular twice-daily meditation, I had an initial experience with consciousness expansion during a deep meditation that I did not understand fully until much later in life. I now know that this was my first adult Spiritually Transformative Experience — a kundalini awakening experience. I will describe this experience in chapter 4 on Spiritual Energy/Kundalini Episodes. Following this kundalini awakening, however, I returned the focus of my attention to my medical-school studies and exams, and for the time being put aside thoughts about my extraordinary meditation experience.

Then on March 27, 1979, during the final year of my medical residency, I had another, much more powerful STE, my first adult Near-Death Experience. This experience was so transformative that I could not push it to the back of my mind. It changed my life forever. In retrospect, I wonder if perhaps my meditation-induced kundalini awakening in some way helped prepare my consciousness for the powerful Near-Death Experience I had a couple years later. This 1979 plane-crash NDE marked the beginning of a profound spiritual transformation in my life.

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The Plane Crash

In the spring of 1979, as part of my residency in Family Medicine at the University of Toronto, I was assigned for one month to a small, rural hospital in Sioux Lookout that provided service for a number of isolated First Nations villages in remote areas of Northern Ontario. On March 27, 1979, my supervising physician designated me to accompany an Indigenous woman, Jean Marie Peters, who had measles encephalitis, on a medical air evacuation from Sioux Lookout to Winnipeg, Manitoba. She needed the more specialized medical facilities there to treat her rapidly deteriorating condition.

During the flight, I was required to supervise her care, giving her the intravenous drugs needed to stabilize her condition and manually pumping a breathing bag, at regular intervals, that would send oxygen directly into her lungs through an airway tube that was inserted through her mouth.

The plane, a six-seat, twin-engine Piper Aztec, was packed. The patient was strapped onto a stretcher directly behind the pilot's seat where two of the original six seats had been, with the oxygen tank wedged behind the seat normally used by a co-pilot. Sally Irwin, a nurse who had also been assigned to the flight, and I were seated beside the patient.

When the plane lifted off the runway, I was so busy tending the patient that I didn't notice a heavy snowstorm had begun. But by the time we had flown for thirty or forty minutes and were about twenty miles from Kenora, a town on Lake of the Woods, the storm had become a near-blizzard. Suddenly, I noticed a change in the sound of the twin propellers. I looked up and saw that the right propeller had stopped. The pilot, Gerald Kruschenske, was vigorously pushing buttons and pulling levers. Something was obviously wrong. Shouting over the roar of the engine, I asked what was going on. He shouted back that everything was all right. About ten seconds later I was reassured when the right propeller started again. Everything seemed to be back to normal, and I returned my attention to the patient.

A few minutes later the left propeller started sputtering. Looking up, I saw that the right propeller was still working but the left propeller had now stopped. Alarmed, I shouted again at the pilot Gerry to find out what was happening, but he didn't answer. He was desperately pushing buttons,

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pulling levers, and pumping handles in an attempt to restart the left engine. I noticed we were flying quite low over the trees and hills. Unbeknownst to the nurse Sally and me, Gerry had been in radio contact with the Kenora airport for some time and was trying to make an emergency landing there. He had already made one attempt, but, flying with only one engine in the howling wind, he couldn't manoeuvre the plane into proper position. The airport then tried to direct him to a landing strip on the frozen lake. Through the raging snow, he saw what he thought was the landing strip and made an attempt to come down, but again he couldn't get the plane into proper position. As he fought to pull the sluggish plane up again and take another try at the landing, he saw a hill near the edge of the lake and realized instantly that the plane would never clear it. Taking his only option, he cut the sputtering right engine and headed down, praying the ice would hold.

Although Sally and I realized something was wrong, I had no idea how desperate the situation was — until I looked out the window and saw the second propeller die. Both engines were gone.

"Oh my God," I thought, "we're going to crash!" A wave of intense fear and panic overtook me. "God, help! I'm going to die!" I mentally cried out.

Then, immediately after my mental cry for help, I suddenly felt a wave of profound peace and calm descend upon me. With the descending calm, I heard an inner voice comforting me. Verses from the Bible — verses that I didn't know by heart and wasn't consciously trying to remember — flowed through my mind, as if they were being poured into my consciousness by some external force: "Be still, and know that I am God."* "I am with you, now and always."** As the words penetrated the depths of my soul, I became flooded with a sense of peace, and the presence of God. I was no longer afraid. It felt like a force field of peace had descended upon me and pushed away all of my fear. My mind was still. I knew that God was there, and somehow I knew with absolute certainty something I had never known before: there was absolutely nothing to fear in death. I felt enveloped and protected by God's peace.

As the plane continued to tumble toward the ground in violent air turbulence, I turned again to tending the patient Jean. She had regained

* Psalms 46:10.

** Matthew 28:20.

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consciousness and was frightened by the turbulence and atmosphere of tension in the plane. Her eyes looked into mine, pleading for help. Filled with a paranormal peace, calm, and bliss that had somehow come upon me, I was able to reassure her. "Everything will be all right," I comforted her, somehow knowing this to be true whether we lived or died. Just then Sally suggested that we turn off the oxygen tank. Agreeing, I turned off the tank and freed Jean so she could breathe on her own, and then continued to calmly reassure her with absolute conviction: I knew somehow, to the core of my being, that no matter what happened, there was nothing to fear.

Gerry managed to steer the powerless, falling plane and crash-landed it onto the ice of a semifrozen lake. But just as the plane touched down on the ice, Gerry saw that the plane was skidding toward a huge stretch of open water. Knowing the plane would never stop in time, he forced its nose down into the ice to slow our skid. The nose dug in and, by some miracle, the plane stopped just at the edge of the ice beside open water.

But, as soon as the plane stopped and the full weight of the plane settled, the ice began to break and the plane quickly started to sink into the freezing water. Gerry jumped out of his front door, stood on the left wing, and started radioing an emergency message.

Meanwhile, icy water was filling the floor of the plane, and I was struggling without success to open the co-pilot's door in front of me on the right. The water rose rapidly. I shouted to the pilot Gerry to assist me but he was still frantically trying to radio for help. The freezing water was pouring deeper and deeper into the plane. Although I was still in a mystical, peaceful state, I knew we urgently needed to get out of the sinking plane. I turned to Sally: "Help me lift the stretcher and we'll float it out." Again I shouted to Gerry. "Help me open the door!" Dropping the radio, he finally grabbed the co-pilot's door handle, found it was jammed, and banged with his fist and foot until he finally managed to force it open.

I stepped out through the door onto the right wing of the plane and found myself up to the groin in freezing lake water. Though I pulled with all my might and weight at patient Jean's stretcher, I could not pull it out of the door. I called to Gerry for help. Just as I did, he shouted, "Get Back! The plane is going down!" I bent into the plane and quickly pulled Sally out from behind the stretcher and, together, standing on the sinking plane wing, we

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desperately tried to pull Jean, floating, strapped to her stretcher, out of the co-pilot's door. But it was impossible. Then I remembered that the stretcher had been loaded through the cargo hatch at the back of the plane, and that there was simply no way to get the stretcher out of the front co-pilot's door. Before we could even think about trying to unstrap her, the plane suddenly tilted radically, nose-dived, and sank. There was no way to dive after Jean; the plane had sunk without a trace into deep, pitch-black water.

Gerry, Sally, and I suddenly found ourselves floating in freezing water about two hundred yards from the closest land, an island. Open water with a strong, swiftly moving current separated us from the shore. Above us a fierce winter storm raged, pelting us with snow and howling wind. Behind us the rest of the lake appeared to be frozen, but we had no way of judging the thickness of the ice. Later, I learned that we had crashed on Lake of the Woods at a place called "Devil's Gap," a spot so named because of the treacherous, strong current, which causes the ice to never freeze in winter.

As I kicked and struggled to keep my head above the water, I quickly began to tire. My soaked arctic parka was heavily dragging me down, and my insulated winter boots were starting to feel like lead weights pulling me down into the water. I tried to take off the heavy parka, but discovered my hands were already so close to frozen that I had lost my sense of touch and couldn't manipulate the zipper. I knew we had to get out of the water, and fast. I looked across the black, icy water and heard a voice in my head say, "Swim to shore!"

Being new to intuitive experiences and higher guidance, I did not listen to the inner voice, but in my mind argued with it. My rational mind remembered what I had been taught in childhood swimming lessons for water safety: "Never try to swim to shore!" "It's always farther than it seems." "You'll drown if you try," I had been taught. Meanwhile Gerry repeatedly shouted, "Try to get on the ice!" I therefore ignored the inner voice's instructions and instead turned away from shore and swam toward the ice. I then tried to climb on it.

Each time I attempted to kick and pull myself up onto the ice, the ice beneath my arms would break off in large chunks and sink. Again and again I tried, struggling and kicking my feet vigorously, becoming more exhausted with each unsuccessful attempt to pull myself up. The voice in

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my head repeated, "Swim to shore!" Sally was clinging tightly to Gerry. I later learned that she could not swim. Together they persisted in desperately trying to get onto the ice. But the ice was too thin to support anyone's weight. "Swim to shore," the inner voice repeated strongly in my mind, for the third time. Finally I surrendered to the inner voice's guidance. "The ice is too thin," I shouted to Gerry and Sally. I then turned from the ice and began swimming through the fast-moving open water toward the island shore. It was a long and very difficult swim.

I was perhaps halfway to shore the first time my body went under in sheer exhaustion. My throat filled immediately with icy lake water. Instinctively I struggled with all my strength and willpower to kick my way back up to the surface. I coughed, sputtered, and gratefully gasped a breath of air into my lungs as I reached the surface again. I then continued my desperate struggle, stroke by stroke, inching my way slowly closer to shore.

Going Out-of-Body into the Light

Suddenly, as I struggled through the frigid water, I heard a low-pitched whooshing noise, something like the rushing of a large bird's wings. At the same time, I felt my consciousness abruptly rise up out of my body and found myself looking down at my body struggling through the water below. It seemed as if my awareness, or what I think of as "I," had expanded to fill a much larger space than it had before, and my point of perception had risen twenty feet or so above my physical body. The sense of peace and calm I had been feeling intensified, and then I rose further, to a space filled with bright light and a sense of intense unconditional love.

In this light-filled space I felt like I was "HOME," that I was being embraced and permeated by profound unconditional love, a love that I immediately knew emanated from the infinitely loving Higher Power behind the universe. I also knew, somehow, that this loving Higher Power was infinitely intelligent, underlying all of creation — past, present, and future. This was not an intellectual knowledge; it was a certainty that went to the very core of my being — a soul-knowing. The embracing presence of this loving intelligence enveloped and permeated me. It was

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the most profoundly beautiful, blissful experience I have ever had in my life. I was in loving, joyous ecstasy. I knew that everything was unfolding as it should.

The light of the light realm was not brilliant and blinding, but was soft and diffused, glowing beautifully. It appeared somewhat like the soft sparkling light that you can see all around you from a plane window, just before a rising plane breaks through the top of clouds into bright sunshine above.

I briefly saw a luminous face of light in this light realm, gazing at me gently from the soft cloud-like perimeter, then the face faded from view. I did not recognize this benevolent-appearing face, and still wonder about it to this day. The masculine face appeared kind, emanating gentleness and love. I did not disclose that I saw this face in the light for many years because it felt so extraordinary and sacred to me.

Consciousness Two Places at Once

From above in the light realm, I watched with detachment and blissful curiosity as my physical body swam to shore. My body was still alive, aggressively struggling to swim to shore. But somehow my awareness seemed to be two places at once. A small part of my awareness was still in my physical body, but most of my awareness — say 95 percent — was out of my body, floating above my body and looking down, watching the drama unfold below me. I sometimes compare this experience to feeling as if I were perceiving my life as two images at the same time on a split-screen TV. The bigger picture, 95 percent of my awareness, was the perception of bliss/ecstasy in the loving light. The smaller picture, as in the upper corner of a split-screen TV, was the tiny portion of my awareness that was still in my body. I was aware of both realities at the same time. However, most of my awareness was in bliss and ecstasy in the loving light.

As my body struggled to reach the island shore, I sank again into the icy water from sheer exhaustion and the weight of my waterlogged clothes. Again icy lake water filled my lungs. As I watched from above, I saw myself sputter, cough, and struggle back to the surface. A few minutes later, when my body was completely exhausted, about to go under for the third and final time, the split-screen images of my awareness flipped, and my consciousness seemed to

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slip mainly back into my body for a while. I found myself looking toward the shore through my physical eyes. It was only about twenty feet away, but there was a strong current pulling me to the right and I could swim no farther. I was still in that mystical state of bliss and ecstasy, and I knew with absolute certainty in this state that death held nothing to fear. I knew that "I" would live on whether my body lived or died. I felt only an intellectual curiosity, and can remember thinking, "Oh, I see, I am meant to die here," and "It is true, you do drown the third time you go down."

Fearlessly and blissfully I surrendered to the Divine and what I thought was my death. But just at that moment, as I was about to go down for the final time, I saw — once again, through my physical eyes — that a tall, fallen pine tree lay in the water, extending out from the island shore. The tree was to my right, and the current was rapidly carrying me toward it. Suddenly I realized that if I could swim just two more strokes, the current would carry me right to the top of the tree. In my expanded state of consciousness, I could see an etheric rescuing hand superimposed upon the tree, beckoning and reaching out to help me.

Somehow I was given the strength to swim those last few strokes. When my frozen hand struck the fallen tree, I felt nothing, no sensation at all. I looked down at my completely numb hand holding the tree, saw that it was bright red, and felt surprised. My rational, medically trained mind pierced my blissful state of consciousness, telling me my hand should be white if it were frozen, since blood vessels constrict to save body heat. Later I learned that, in the latter stages of freezing, the body loses the ability to constrict blood vessels and the white frozen hands become red. Death usually comes fairly quickly after this if the body isn't warmed.

Mechanically, I pulled myself along the tree to the island shore and clambered over some piles of ice onto the land. I immediately turned to the lake and shouted out to Gerry and Sally "Swim to shore! You can make it!" I urged them. Gerry by that time had helped Sally grab a piece of frozen wood and ice that was keeping her afloat. It wouldn't hold them both, so he turned and started swimming to shore. He eventually made it in and crawled to my side. Then the lake was silent. The nurse had stopped crying for help. I believed that she, like our patient Jean, must have drowned.

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