

PRESENTATION/DOCUMENTATION OF PROJECT

# THE SHIMMERING CATHEDRAL

*Extraordinary Spiritual Experiences  
And The Meaning We Make of Them*

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## Part Four: Disclosure - The Meaning of ESEs



*Painting in the church of El Sitio, Suchitoto, El Salvador*

## Numbers 22:36-38

When Balak heard that Balaam had come, he went out to meet him at Ir-moab, on the boundary formed by the Arnon, at the farthest point of the boundary. Balak said to Balaam, 'Did I not send to summon you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honour you?' Balaam said to Balak, 'I have come to you now, but do I have power to say just anything? The word God puts in my mouth, that is what I must say.'

## Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

By way of Balaam and his talking donkey, much less his encounter with an angel in the road, and by way of Mary, mother of Jesus, with the angel Gabriel, we begin to see that these extraordinary spiritual experiences in Scripture ask us to sink ourselves deeply into the epic strangeness of what is going on in these stories. In a deep engagement with ESEs, though, we must allow ourselves to get used to a universe that is much more complex and stranger than we often allow ourselves to accept. An ESE, facilitated or spontaneous, opens the reducing valve of the mind, as Aldous Huxley said. Once opened, we must deal with a whole vast universe of inexplicable things.

Let's review where we have been:

We began in Part One with set and setting. Set means the state of mind and how we are perceiving at the time of an ESE. Setting is the space we experience the ESE within and where an ESE is occurring. When we speak of space, we also mean the cultural, local, and personal objects and influences that surround the experiencer. The setting may have great significance to the experience or none at all. Setting can also affect the set, our state of mind.

The next aspect of an ESE, Part Two, is the appearance. This stage of an ESE speaks to whatever is showing up and can include everything from divine beings to discarnate and disembodied entities to fairies and brownies to cryptids, like Bigfoot or Hodags, to bizarre bodily experiences to unrecognizable dimensional spaces. Sometimes, what is appearing is intelligible and fits our cultural and experiential background. Sometimes, the appearance does not make much sense at all. Sometimes, an ESE will simply be a thing appearing and we are left to our own devices to figure something meaningful out of the appearance<sup>0</sup>.

<sup>0</sup> It bears repeating that my concern in this project is not whether these aspects are real in any material sense. We are concerned with mapping experience and acknowledging the transformative element of the ESE encounter. It would be disingenuous, however, for me to suggest I am completely agnostic to some of the weirder elements of ESEs. I recognize, however, that my personal belief based on my own ESEs does not constitute any sort of proof that these things are 'real' in the ontological sense. Rather, the experience is very real, in a phenomenological sense.

Other times, we have the third aspect of an ESE, which is revelation, Part Three.

Revelation is the stage where an ESE tells us why what has appeared has shown up. Sometimes, there is a message disclosed from the beings or creatures that have appeared. Sometimes, the revelation might be a powerful personal insight from the ESE. The revelation is an internal meaning that has been shown to us. The revelation is the beginning of making meaning of the ESE.

Meaning making of an ESE is often a long-term effort, however. The extraordinariness of the experience, in conjunction with the weirdness of the spiritual element of the ESE, does not lend itself to quick interpretations, particularly when we keep the ESE to ourselves. The meaning-making is limited to our own reflection and self-awareness, which can only get us so far. This is because ESEs are, finally, communal. Full meaning cannot be made until the ESE is shared with others. This engagement with the community is the fourth aspect of an ESE, called The disclosure.

It is a hope of this project that understanding an ESE and having some sense of the movement of an ESE, we can begin to create safe spaces for people to disclose their experiences and generate a conversation that deepens meaning and understanding. As a resident of the United States, I live in a profoundly individualized culture. An ESE is often seen as a purely personal encounter that carries meaning solely for the individual that has had the experience. But for millennia, ESEs were considered to have meaning for the entire community. They were experiences that carried a revelation for many, not for one. ESEs, once we have a sense of the pattern of them, provide an opportunity to recover the communal and participatory engagement that the spiritual demands and seeks.

The disclosure, then, is the open-ended process that seeks meaning across time and place. Meaning-making is fluid, slippery, and subject to revision over time and across personal and cultural boundaries. While meaning-making requires community, that community may have layered definitions as well. These layers may include a close community of like-minded, committed people, as in a church or a circle of friends. It may include an academic community where ideas and experiments are tossed back and forth and analyzed for depth and understanding, as in a research lab. The community may stretch across time and place by way of books and writings about the subject, or today, YouTube videos and social media. This seeking of meaning across multiple channels is a primary part of an ESE. The structure of an ESE demands meaning be made of the experience by way of disclosure to a community of interest.

Let's briefly see how this works with Balaam and Mother Mary. When we look at Balaam, his disclosure is quite lengthy. What we do know from our time with Balaam and his donkey is that Balaam can only say anything that the Lord has told him to say. Balaam has a brief discussion with the king Balak, who says (I am paraphrasing), "Why are you late? I brought you here to speak a word of victory to my troops before war. In fact, I paid you to do so." Balaam responds (again, I paraphrase), "Yes, about that. I no longer have the power to just say anything. Now, whatever God puts in my mouth, I must say" (Num 22:37-38). Balaam does not disclose that he got all this from a talking donkey and an angel in the road. Even so, the next two chapters are Balaam's prophecies of the destruction of Balak's kingdom.

Balaam is called by vocation and call to disclose dimensions of his ESE along the road with his donkey, but not everything. His prophecy is part of not only Balaam's process of making meaning, but also Balak and all who hear Balaam. The meaning making of Balaam's ESE even stretches to those of us who read these passages.

With Mary, we see a deeper disclosure. Mary visits Elizabeth, who carries the child John, who will become John the Baptist. When Mary and Elizabeth meet, Elizabeth tells Mary, “The child in my womb leaped for joy at the sound of your greeting” (Lk 1:44). The gathering of the women generates one of the most powerful poems in Scripture, Mary’s Magnificat, which is a hymn of joy and hope regarding the meaning(s) of the coming birth of her son.

Balaam’s prophecies and Mary’s Magnificat are the initial forays into finding the communal meaning of their respective ESEs. The way Luke has constructed his Gospel, we can read Mary’s initial disclosure of her ESE in the Magnificat as the beginning of Mary’s meaning-making. When reading Luke, we need to remember that Mary’s perspective drives Luke’s narrative. One way to imagine the Gospel of Luke is to see it as Mary making sense of the life and story of her son, Jesus, a story which begins with an ESE. Mary’s ESE with the Angel Gabriel looks very different at the end of the story than at the beginning. The meaning making is continuous throughout Mary’s life, and because Luke has written it down, we are now also included in Mary’s meaning-making these many years later.

Disclosing something deeply personal like an ESE can be awkward. Worse, the disclosure to others may not bring any clarity initially. It is however the beginning of meaning-making. In the same way Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection call us to develop a taste for ambiguity, ESEs call us to develop some experience with awkwardness and lack of clarity. Telling people personal things can be uncomfortable, and faith communities need practice in disclosing the strange, unusual, and difficult. As my spouse, Kathrin, says, “Any disclosure is a leap of faith and a leap into faith.”

As a model of the aspect of disclosure, let me tell you a personally significant ESE. Like Balaam and Mary, some parts of my ESEs are worth telling and others aren’t. Some parts of an

ESE are meant only for the person; other parts are meant for others to hear. I hold an unproveable belief that the ancient world was much better than we are at discerning what was for others and what was not, particularly where ESEs, dreams, and visions were concerned. They could tell what was personal, what was for immediate family and friends, and what was for a whole community or nation. Maybe they knew more about the process of meaning-making than we do. But we can learn again the discernment of the ancient world.

Three years ago, I was in a study with Johns Hopkins University for clergy and spiritual leaders. The host of the study was the Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research. The study was about the facilitation of mystical experiences<sup>0</sup>. In this work, there have been several references to spontaneous and facilitated ESEs. Spontaneous ESEs are those ESEs that come upon the experiencer with no preparation or expectation, and facilitated ESEs are prepared for by meditation, studying certain rituals, or by way of particular substances. The study I was in at Johns Hopkins were facilitated experiences designed to trigger mystical experiences in people who have been primed for the mystical by way of study, career, and belief.

Twenty-four spiritual leaders were part of the study, which took almost 6 years to complete. Each of us went through the study separately and without knowledge of who the others were. I went through the study in December of 2018 and January of 2019. Each of us came from several different faith traditions, but most participants were of Jewish and Christian background.

The leaders of the study facilitated mystical events by way of a class of substances in the world that do this very effectively and have for millennia. These substances have been used by

<sup>0</sup> Johns Hopkins University. 2021. "Effects of Psilocybin-Facilitated Experience on the Psychology and Effectiveness of Professional Leaders in Religion." Clinical trial registration study/NCT02243813. [clinicaltrials.gov. https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/study/NCT02243813](https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/study/NCT02243813).



indigenous groups of people all around the world, by great civilizations like Greece and ancient India, and now by researchers in universities and studies around the world. These substances are called ‘psychedelics’, or ‘mind-manifesting/altering’ substances. At high doses, these substances can facilitate or trigger mystical experiences. This is what the study I was in wanted to find out: will people who are already primed for mystical experiences have mystical experiences when they take high doses of psychedelics.

Some people will have mystical experiences, ESEs, with these substances. Some people won’t. The team at Johns Hopkins, headed up by Dr. Roland Griffiths, have been studying psychedelics since 2000. Several thousand people have been through various studies with psychedelics for treatment with addiction, depression, end-of-life treatment, and PTSD. Each participant has a couple sitters or guides who are with them as they go through a 6–7-hour experience. This is cutting edge research that is blossoming in many forms around the world.

The study was designed to facilitate a mystical experience with psychedelics, and for me it most certainly did. I have had several significant ESEs throughout my life. All of them were spontaneous, prior to my participation in the Johns Hopkins study. My ESEs, prior to the study at Johns Hopkins, are the reason I am a pastor in the church. Then in April of 2018, a friend in sent me an ad he saw seeking recruits for this study. I followed through and qualified.

When Dr William Richards, who designed this particular study, asked me why I wanted to participate in the study, I said, “I have had glimpses of what is beyond the veil and want to see the superstructure of reality.” I have a sense that what I saw during my experience was a deeper glimpse of that superstructure. Before my Johns Hopkins experience, I had no experience with psychedelics. They scared me. My fears of psychedelics were formed by the anti-drug movements of the late 1970s and 1980s. But with Johns Hopkins, I was in a safe, controlled,

observed environment 650 feet from the entrance to the best emergency room in the country. So, I said yes to the study.

There were two sessions in the study, which took place in a calm room on the campus of Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. The room was softly decorated with low lighting, pictures on the wall, and curated music played through recessed speakers on the ceiling. The study was designed around a substance called psilocybin, which is the active ingredient in ‘magic mushrooms’. Psilocybin creates a 6–8-hour experience. Psilocybin, and all psychedelics, removes the reducing valve that maintains the guardrails, boundaries, and sensations of everyday life. In my study, I have come to believe these substances do not just show us the inside of our personal mind, but also show us the structure of the mind itself. This is why psychedelics are being used to study the nature of consciousness. This is also why this book is structured the way it is. Psychedelics and ESEs provide us an insight into the landscapes of minds and the map we use can be helpful in how we help others navigate their ESEs.

I am still making meaning of my experiences and that is part of why I am disclosing those experiences by way of this project. Given that is true of my personal experiences and my Johns Hopkins experiences, I have realized it is also true of the ESEs we claim as part of our faith. ESEs demand we make meaning of them with other people. This extends an ESE into and through time. As an example of what this means, we are still making meaning of Jesus’ ESE and the ESEs of the disciples. We are still making meaning of our faith. The meaning of an ESE does not stay static. Instead, the meanings move, weave, and slither through time, place, and culture.

My experiences at Johns Hopkins strengthened my faith. I am still not sure how, but an effect of an ESE, and particularly psychedelics, is to reinforce and reframe one’s beliefs in such a

way that they help align a person with their external experience of the world. Even though my faith was strengthened, I didn't see God or Jesus in my sessions at Johns Hopkins.

What I did experience during my first session was that the universe is a vast, shimmering, multi-dimensional cathedral built with transparent bricks that glitter with iridescent colors, some of which are not on the color spectrum. I was led into the cathedral by the appearance of an angelic being who led me down a huge onyx spiral staircase. High up in the arches of the sanctuary, crows flew back and forth. I somehow knew they were messengers of some sort. Sound vibrated with color, and resonated off the glittering windows and high, curving walls. Then, I crossed over into another part of the cathedral. This crossing over was almost like a death. I hurt and was afraid. I could feel life pulling away from my body. There was a time of emptiness, lost time, as if I was being transported by a device designed to shuttle a person from one world to another.

On the other side, a woman named Jean met me. Jean was a member of the church I pastored at the time. For almost a year and a half, Jean and I met weekly to discuss her eventual death from lung cancer. As with so many meetings like this, I learned far more from Jean than she did from me. We became close friends during those meetings.

After Jean met me, she took me on a tour of the undercrofts of the vast, shimmering cathedral. Then, we went up a short ramp out of the lower levels of the vast, shimmering cathedral and came onto me a cobblestone street in Paris, just off the Avenue des Champs-Elysees. It was night and the chairs were leaned against the tables and the moon reflected off the shiny rocks in the street. Jean told me that this is where she hangs out now. Heaven, it seems, is Paris at night.

Almost 3 years later, I remember all this like it happened yesterday.

Sometimes, ESEs transmit a revelation, or message. The message I received in this first experience was one that filled me with grief and now directs my life. That message was “Beauty is leaving the earth, and some must choose to be curators and carriers of beauty so beauty can be remembered in the future.” This is part of the meaning making experience of my ESE, which still continues, but for now it tells me I must always be looking for the beautiful because I need to remember it for others.

The intent of disclosure, or at least this disclosure, is not to convince a person to believe it to be ‘real’ or even as a testimony of faith, even though I consider my experience to be a clarifying journey of the spirit. Disclosure helps us understand the power of ESEs to change lives. In the studies at Johns Hopkins, it is the ESE, the mystical encounter, according to researchers, that changes people<sup>0</sup>. ESEs reveal to us that the universe is infinitely more complex than what we perceive and are told to perceive.

We are profoundly sensitive creatures. We may be the most sensitive creatures on the planet<sup>0</sup>. This means we are first and foremost experiencers of the world. Some of those experiences reach beyond this material world into the forms of the worlds of mind, and then beyond there into the spiritual worlds. These experiences and realms are real, in the sense that when we experience them, they come to us as an experience of, as Paul Tillich says, the ‘really real’.

We are an exquisitely attuned instrument which receives and perceives far more than we are aware. In saying this, we are deep into the realms of the mystical. How shall we make meaning of what we have brought back from the mystical awareness, from the ESE we have

<sup>0</sup> “Mind Meld 144 | Cataloging the Ineffable with Dr. Matthew Johnson.” 2019, *THIRD EYE DROPS* (podcast), February 18, 2019, <http://thirdeyedrops.com/matthew-johnson-2/>, accessed 1/8/2022.

<sup>0</sup> Whitley Strieber and Jeffrey Kripal, *The Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* (New York, NY: Jeremy P Tarcher/Penguin, 2016), 48-51.

experienced or heard about? I believe that whatever our faith commitment may be, we need to begin to share with one another what those forms of mind and spiritual realms are like for one another. This is really what we are up to on Sunday mornings: making meaning together of the deeper things of this universe and what we know of God.

ESEs are inherently weird. If we give any credence to the appearance and revelation of ESEs, we must recognize there are significant dangers as well. Some people have significant disorders that generate ESEs. We need to discern the experience from the disorder, helping a person distinguish what is real, in the sense spoken of above, about the experience they have had and what is an indicator of a serious situation. The two are not mutually exclusive.

Another danger is that people can be misled rather easily by various means. Charismatic spiritual leaders can use ESEs to lord it over others or use their own ESEs against others. These leaders can use the intimate information in the disclosure of an ESE to manipulate followers into all manner of behavior and choices that go against one's free will and desire. In this I speak from experience, having spent twelve years in a New Age martial arts cult. The leader of the cult was masterful and adept at using ESEs to maintain power over his students. The extraordinary, the spiritual, and the experiential can be used to harm and control other people. We need to stay awake to the very real, and sometimes deadly, dangers of being manipulated and misled by way of ESEs.

Let's reflect for a moment on followers of Jesus. Followers of Jesus gather in places of worship to celebrate several ESEs every year as high holidays. We celebrate the Annunciation of Mary, Jesus' birth, Jesus' baptism, Jesus at the transfiguration, Jesus' resurrection, or Easter, the arrival of the Holy Spirit to the disciples after the Resurrection, which is called Pentecost - fantastic ESEs, each one. The entire construct of Christian worship and tradition is built

completely on ESEs. People do not commit their lives to a good idea or an interesting thought. People commit because of an experience they have had, or because they trust the experience someone else has had. People are curious about ideas. People are committed to ideas that become experiences.

The future of the church is the experiential. The Christian church should be at the vanguard of being the safe place to share ESEs, to be a gathering place to learn about the beings and ways of being that are of this world and beyond this world.

As followers of Jesus, we are asked and called to participate in the great, creative life of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit in this set and setting we all occupy. As individuals, how we participate is as different as each person. As a church and as an individual, we make meaning of the experiences that arise from our participation in the life of faith. What appears and what is revealed in that process will make for profound disclosures, which inform the meaning each of us make of our encounters with the ineffable and mysterious God. Some of us have had ESEs that are life changing. We can only make so much meaning on our own. We need other experiencers with whom to share, to whom we can disclose.

As followers of Jesus, as those who have been invited into the unpredictable, winding, shimmering gathering of God, the Holy Spirit, and Christ, we are participating in an extraordinary, spiritual, ongoing experience that reaches all the way back to the moment Mary said to Elizabeth, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s servant” (Lk 1:46-48a). Even now, we are still making meaning with her, with her Son, and with his disciples.

The act of disclosure can come in many forms. The arts are a uniquely effective way of communicating the disclosure of an ESE. Part Four will explore that communication by way of

music, often called ‘the universal language’. ESEs transform how we hear and see. ESEs also restructure and reconstruct how we make spiritual sense of the world, so we will consider how ESEs transform theologies and mystical worldviews. Consciousness and awareness are said to be expanded by ESEs. What that means constitutes a shifting and diverse landscape and so we will take some time to find our way through the act of making meaning. Finally, we will conclude with a personal reflection on my personal experience that gave rise to this work, followed by a brief discussion of what all this means for the future of our faith lives with Christ and the church.

## **Musical Landscapes**