

ROBERT MAYS pro Alexander

Luke Dittrich, and Esquire, Have Been Debunked!

[Robert Mays](#) did a bit of fact checking on [Luke Dittrich's Esquire article](#) about NDEr Eben Alexander, and it came up rather short in terms of journalistic integrity. [I've written about this in my blog already](#), but Craig suggested that I continue here with some additional commentary. It's important to set the record straight.

There were some red flags in the Esquire article that stood out immediately, such as the bizarre way in which the Dalai Lama's comments to Dr Alexander were mischaracterized by Dittrich. It certainly makes no sense to anyone who has seen the video of that event. Just watch the [video](#) yourself. As Robert Mays pointed out, Dittrich somehow missed some rather important bits of dialogue, such as this:

[47:46] [DL] And for that also you see, we must investigate. Through investigation we must get sure that person is truly reliable and his experience is something not just illusion of these things. [48:02] Through then thorough investigation, that person is reliable, never telling lie – **and in this particular case [there] is no reason to tell lie** – therefore, [translator] so **then one can take the testimony to be credible**. [translator] So the point I'm trying to make is that with respect to science and its scope for discovering knowledge, we need to make a distinction about the fact that there might be certain types of phenomena which are beyond the scope of scientific inquiry. (emphasis added)

The main impetus of the Esquire article was to debunk all of NDE research based on one case. It's essentially telling us that the "biological robot" meme is true, so stop wasting time reading about NDEs. It's an appeal to be willfully blind to the large body of evidence in peer-reviewed literature that considers many such cases, based on Dittrich's attempt to debunk a single case. And he wasn't even able to do so honestly.

Interestingly enough, Dittrich is currently writing a book about his neurosurgeon grandfather's work on memory. Just the sort of work being brought into question by today's consciousness research, especially work focusing on NDEs. Could that be the reason Dittrich so aggressively attacked Dr Alexander's reputation without actually checking the facts?

Alex Tsakiris, host of the [Skeptiko](#) podcast, invited Mr Dittrich on the show to give him the opportunity to defend his work and explain why there wasn't a reasonable effort made to do some basic fact checking. Dittrich declined.

Quite honestly, The Esquire article goes beyond just being sloppy and inaccurate journalism. Dittrich seems to have purposefully twisted statements and misrepresented the facts in a determined effort to cause harm to Dr Alexander's reputation. The most damning statement in regards to the inaccuracy of the Esquire article comes from Dr Laura Potter, Dittrich's prime witness against Dr Alexander.

"I am saddened by and gravely disappointed by the article recently published in *Esquire*. The content attributed to me is both out of context and does not accurately portray the events around Dr. Eben Alexander's hospitalization. I felt my side of the story was misrepresented by the reporter. I believe Dr. Alexander has made every attempt to be factual in his accounting of events." —Dr. Laura Potter

I recommend reading [Robert Mays' full article on the LANDS website](#). He goes into a great deal of detail on a number of inaccuracies in the Esquire article.

Thank you, Robert, for setting the record straight.

Esquire Proof of Heaven Expose Debunked, Dr. Eben Alexander Prevails

August 27th, 2013 Alex Tsakiris

Interview with Robert Mays reveals a disturbing pattern of misrepresentation and distortion in Luke Dittrich's Proof of Heaven expose published in Esquire Magazine.

UPDATE: Email to Luke Dittrich and Esquire

Date: 8/27/2013

From: Mr. Alex Tsakiris, Skeptiko.com

To: Mr. Luke Dittrich, Contributing Editor, Esquire
Mr. David Granger, Editor in Chief, Esquire

Dear Luke and David (by way of Matt)... today Skeptiko.com published an important interview suggesting serious errors were made in Esquire's recent piece on Dr. Eben Alexander.

Robert and Suzanne Mays investigated Alexander's case and have email correspondence from Dr. Laura Potter. In these emails Dr. Potter claims your Esquire article misrepresented her, and distorted crucial parts of Alexander's medical case.

I think you would agree that if these emails are genuine they would suggest a serious breach of journalistic integrity as the crux of your expose rests on Dr. Potter's account.

I'm happy to present your side of these events, and am again extending my offer to interview you on Skeptiko.

Thx,
Alex
Skeptiko.com

Join Skeptiko host Alex Tsakiris for an interview with Robert Mays about his recently published article, *Esquire article on Eben Alexander distorts the facts*. During the interview Mays talks about what his investigation discovered:

Alex Tsakiris: The Dittrich article in Esquire, it's extremely well-crafted. Let's give them that. And he builds this case with the facts that he has, but he really builds this whole thing around — *this guy's a liar*. He approaches it from a number of different angles, some of which are really substantive to the story like the coma thing, and these other things that he picks at, but they do kind of stick in your mind as you're reading the article. Like the rainbow thing. Tell us what the rainbow thing is all about and then tell us what you found out.

Robert Mays: In the book, on Sunday morning according to the story that Dr. Alexander wrote, his sister, Phyllis, and his mother, Betty, were coming into the hospital and saw a perfect rainbow. They felt this was a sign. Dittrich took this as saying Heaven itself was heralding Eben Alexander's return. Dittrich then asked the meteorologist whether there could have been a rainbow then and the meteorologist said, "Well, the day was clear so there couldn't have been."

I said, "Well, wait a minute. Two people said they saw it." So I called Phyllis Alexander and she said, "Definitely we saw a rainbow. Betty remarked that it was a perfect rainbow." They talked about it. Then they went immediately up to Eben's room and there Eben was, sitting up. So that was the time that he had recovered.

Alex Tsakiris: And just to add a little tidbit that you talk about in your article that I thought was great and is the real kind of journalism that we would have liked to have gotten from *Esquire* is that you not only talked to these eyewitnesses, which he did not—he just went on some meteorological report—but they also had evidence. It was such a spectacular event that they had written an email.

Robert Mays: Right. That day Phyllis said she had written to friends in Boston who were praying for Eben. She said, "Eben has recovered and I saw a beautiful rainbow as I was coming into the hospital." So there's that documentation, as well. So Luke Dittrich's argument there is empty.

Alex Tsakiris: It's shoddy journalism. If you're trying to debunk something, which I've run across so many times, that's one thing. You're a debunker. You're just out there throwing whatever you can against the wall and seeing what sticks. But if you're *Esquire*, who still has some kind of legitimacy as a journalistic enterprise, you have to do more than this. You have to talk to witnesses. You have to get their side of it. I think this lays a pattern for what else we're about to talk about.

(later)

Alex Tsakiris: Here's what you get from Luke Dittrich's story in *Esquire* — Dr. Laura Potter discredits Dr. Eben Alexander's story. It couldn't have happened the way he described. He wasn't really in a coma. He was delirious.

So why don't you pick up from there, Robert? You've said you put a couple calls in to Dr. Potter at this point in the story. You haven't heard back. What happens next?

Robert Mays: I received, from members of the family copies of emails that they had been sending back and forth. In that was a statement that Dr. Potter had made. Later I learned it was a statement that she had issued to a news organization. Apparently that news organization did not use it. In any case, that statement was that she was misquoted and taken out of context. So I said, "Whoa. This is really quite strange."

Alex Tsakiris: In fact, she stated that her account was misrepresented, and that she felt like the questions weren't fair. And this is backed up by what you heard from the family, right? Because the family talks to Dr. Potter and she's apologizing, saying "Gosh, I don't know how this happened." That's what I took away from your article. Is that what you got from talking to the family?

Robert Mays: Right. And basically Dr. Potter expressed to the family that she had been misrepresented and that her words were taken out of context by Luke Dittrich and that he had led her to say certain things.

The question that Luke Dittrich says he posed to her I don't think is a question he actually posed to her when she said, "Yes, conscious but delirious." It would be very interesting to see what exactly happened in that interview and just understand what she was responding to.

Alex Tsakiris: I think it would be more than interesting. I think it's absolutely his responsibility, given the damage that this article has done and sought to do from the beginning. There's an added level of journalistic responsibility to get your facts right. These things being called into question this way demands that he really back up his claims.

Today we welcome Robert Mays to *Skeptiko*. Robert, along with his wife, Suzanne, have been longtime researchers in the field of near-death experience and consciousness studies. They've published quite a few papers and have done presentations for both, the International Association of Near-Death Studies Conference, and the well-known Science of Consciousness Conference in Tucson, Arizona. So, anyone who's familiar with this field very well might have bumped into the work of these two very interesting and excellent near-death experience researchers.

Robert is here today to talk about a new article they just published titled, "Esquire Article on Eben Alexander Distorts the Facts," in which they tell about their investigation into the near-death experience account of Harvard neurosurgeon Eben Alexander, who last year published a blockbuster best-seller book titled, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Near-Death Experience and Journey Into the Afterlife*. So with that I'd like to introduce you to Robert Mays.

Robert, thanks so much for joining me today on *Skeptiko*.

Robert Mays: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Alex Tsakiris: Before we dive into this article that you've published on Dr. Eben Alexander's case and then the book and the controversy that's stirred up around that, I thought you could tell us a little bit about the research that you and Suzanne have done. In checking out your website there's a lot of stuff that you guys have published in this field. Tell us a little bit about that.

Robert Mays: Well, we have a basic theory based on the near-death experience that the mind, a person's consciousness, separates from the body in a near-death experience and operates independently of it. Then, of course, at the end of the near-death experience it rejoins the body.

Alex Tsakiris: This isn't something that you've just dreamt up or anything. It's a compilation of a lot of research and you present your case. From what I've seen you do a very fair job of saying, "Hey, doesn't the evidence point there?" You do some great stuff on the phantom limb phenomena, which is a well-known medical phenomenon that when an amputee loses an arm or a leg they can still have sensations down there. You question in a very scientific, scholarly way whether or not some research points to that as being further evidence of this separation between consciousness and brain function. Right?

Robert Mays: Exactly. The phantom limbs, they are a region where the limb was that still has a region of consciousness. So we call that a mind-to-limb. That's one of the pieces of evidence that we use. Also a lot of neurological evidence that we use because if you look at neurological phenomena from the point of view of could this be a mind and a brain operating, then a lot of things start to make a lot of sense.

For example, Benjamin Libet did quite a number of studies where he showed that mental events become conscious only when there's sufficient electrical brain activity. Otherwise, they remained subliminal. Of course, neuroscientists know that but if you think about it, if it requires a certain amount of electrical activity for there to be formed the consciousness in the mind, then that makes a lot of sense. So we use the neurological phenomena, phantom limb phenomena, and the NDE phenomena.

Alex Tsakiris: One of the reasons that I even brought up the broad research that you've done into consciousness and near-death studies is that I think that plays an important part into this story we're about to tell about Dr. Eben Alexander. That is, you have done near-death experience research. You've read many of the dozens and dozens of scholarly books, hundreds of papers. You've met a lot of these people at conferences, interacted with them on a professional basis. I guess the reason I keep hounding on that is I want to go back a little bit.

I had a chance to interview Dr. Eben Alexander in November of 2011 before he had written the book. I thank the listeners of Skeptiko who alerted me to this guy and said, "Hey, here's this guy, neurosurgeon from Harvard. Had this rather incredible near-death experience. Do you think you should talk to him?" I was like, "Wow, this is great."

But from the beginning, my thought was *Hey, great. Another fantastic near-death experience account.* I certainly didn't take it as being that out of the ordinary or unusual. So I guess I was surprised when the book came out a year later and there was just this backlash against Alexander, as if this was the first near-death experience account that had ever come out. Or as if there wasn't a substantial body of research to back up the reality of these phenomena. I felt from the beginning that it was much more of a focus on attacking this one person than attacking the larger body of near-death experience research. Did you have any similar thoughts to that, Robert? Did you see it differently when his book first came out?

Robert Mays: This is a kind of pattern, I think, that skeptics have. They will take the particular phenomenon and say, "Well, that's just an anecdote." They don't look at the whole picture of near-death experience research and see there are patterns. This

happens all the time when people claim that some sort of neurological phenomenon explains near-death experiences.

Alex Tsakiris: I want to take it back one step further. When Eben Alexander comes out with his book—before the book actually comes out, there was a *Newsweek* article, and he was on the cover of it. I think that really riled up the scientific, Atheistic, mainstream media. But maybe for a reason that is somewhat justified because let's also be real, too.

Here's a guy in Eben Alexander who was the right guy at the right place. Has this amazing story, gets this really substantial book deal, and you can just imagine they bring him in and say, "Okay, buddy, here's your editor. Here's your marketing guy. Here's your media guy. We're going to get you on the *Today* show." All that other stuff. "And by the way, here's the title of your book. *Proof of Heaven*."

This really kind of sticks it to the Atheists, right? The scientific folks are fighting this religious culture war and here's a guy coming out with a book titled *Proof of Heaven*. You've got to know, fairly or unfairly, they felt a pretty strong need to strike back and they did it in the old time-tested way of if you can't attack the evidence, attack the person. That's what I think is going on here. I think that title, *Proof of Heaven*, did rile those folks more than even usual in this case.

Robert Mays: Yes, I agree with that.

Alex Tsakiris: Let's go forward. One additional point I want to bring up on that is when the book did come out, one of the first guys who jumped forward and led this charge of attack from the science crowd and Atheist crowd was Sam Harris. I actually had an email exchange with Dr. Harris that I think is pretty revealing. He came out and said—and I don't know how he could back this up but he did. He wrote this scathing review and basically questioned Alexander's integrity. To your point, Robert, it's the kind of talking points thing. He gets those talking points out there that we will see repeated over and over again. He had claims that his account wasn't factual. He's basically calling him a liar. And he does all this even before the book is even published.

So I sent an email to Dr. Alexander. He was nice enough to respond. I want to read for you the response that Dr. Alexander published. I think it also plays into the next part of this story that we're going to get into, which is the article that you and Suzanne wrote where you really investigated these claims further.

Here's what Dr. Alexander wrote in response to Sam Harris' opening salvo in this battle of whether or not this near-death experience account is really factual or not:

"Of course it was premature for Sam Harris to speak out based on the Newsweek article. He needs to at least read the book if he wants to avoid making embarrassing statements that he later regrets." A nice way of saying he's totally full of crap. And here's the medical part that I think plays into the rest of the story we want to talk about:

"The severity of my meningitis and its complete resistance to therapy for a week should have eliminated all but the most rudimentary of conscious experiences." Then he goes

on to list a bunch of medical data that I don't really know a lot about but I think other people in the medical profession would understand. He talks about his white blood count being extremely low. He talks about bands of toxic granulations being at a level that is very, very worrisome. In particular, he talks about his glucose level being extremely low, a 1.0 when it's normally in the 60 to 80 range and even in a severe meningitis drops down to a 20.

So I will publish this. I've published it once before but I'll include it in this show so that people who do want some of these medical facts can dig into it.

Here are some of the other points that he makes that I think are important. This is again Dr. Alexander responding to Sam Harris a couple of months before this whole *Esquire* thing blew up. He says, "*Going from symptom onset (that is the first symptoms he had of this spinal meningitis) to coma within three hours is a very dire prognostic sign.*"

He was, as we'll get to in a minute, in and out of coma when he was first admitted to the hospital, so that is factual and it's confirmed by the medical records.

Robert Mays: I think he was in coma continuously.

Alex Tsakiris: We'll get into that. I think the medical terms lose meaning to a certain extent because what he's really saying and what all the medical experts are saying consistently is that he was in a state of severely compromised mental/brain functioning throughout. That should not even be controversial. When we start spinning things, coma-induced, coma, all that, we'll get to that. But here is a guy who's laying out some of the medical facts. He says that his state would be 90% mortality rate from the very beginning, given this situation that he has, that it came on so quickly. Then he goes on to say directly to Sam Harris, "*No physician who knows anything about meningitis will just blow off the fact that I was deathly ill in every sense of the word and that my neocortex was absolutely hammered.*"

He goes on to say at the end, "*My physicians and their consultants at the University of Virginia, Wake Forest, Duke, Harvard, Stanford, and beyond, were astonished that I recovered.*"

Again, I think this is backed up in the article that you wrote. Let's get to that. On July 2, 2013, seven or eight months after the book has become a bestseller and sold 2 million copies, I received this email from *Esquire's* editor-in-chief, David Granger.

He writes: "*This morning we published an important article by Luke Dittrich about Dr. Eben Alexander, the author of Proof of Heaven, which has been one of the great successes in book publishing this year. The premise of the book was irresistible. A man of science, a neurosurgeon, is attacked by a rare disease that sends him into a coma and indeed, causes his brain to cease functioning. While he's incapacitated, he has a vivid experience of afterlife. Finally, after being restored to health, he recreates his journey in book form.*"

We had some questions," the editor from Esquire writes. "We asked contributing editor, Luke Dittrich, who's working on a book about neuroscience, what he thought of the science of Alexander's book. Dittrich spent several months both looking into Alexander's medical and scientific background and researching the fact-based claims the book makes. What he's revealed is a series of omissions, contradictions, and inaccuracies in Alexander's book that cast fresh light on its remarkable tale."

So there we have it. This article from Esquire in July of 2013 just created a firestorm. The folks in the scientific/Atheistic community just ran with this. Many had not read the article. It was behind a pay wall, but that's their business. But many had not read it; they just ran with it. As you said earlier, *we've knocked down this guy who everyone is so excited about his near-death experience.*

Last week—that is August 15, 2013, you and Suzanne published an article on the International Association for Near-Death Studies' website. I want to get into that article but I want to start with the conclusion that you write in that article.

Here's what you write, you and Suzanne: *"The Dittrich article (the article published in Esquire) is shoddy and irresponsible journalism. Shoddy because of Luke Dittrich's and his Esquire editor's evident failures."* Then you list some of those failures that I want to talk about. You say that *"They failed to consider alternative explanations. They failed to check with sighted witnesses."* Extremely important. *"Most importantly, they failed to check with medical experts on many of the assertions that they're making."* Again, right up there with the most important. They failed to check on the crucial testimony that they get that this whole thing hinges on and they don't even bother to see whether they really got that right.

So with that very lengthy introduction—and I appreciate you standing by. I can only imagine all the things you have to say because you've done fantastic research into this case. With that as an introduction, can you tell us how this unfolded for you? How you became interested in investigating this *Esquire* article and how all that started.

Robert Mays: Well, I usually write news articles for a website, the IANDS.org website and this is obviously one that needs to be written up and analyzed. If there are things that are in the news article that I'm writing about that need further investigation, like this doesn't make sense, this doesn't seem right, then I go and do whatever investigation I can. So I read Luke Dittrich's article very carefully and found that the key criticism was that the coma was really not a meningitis-induced coma but was really a chemically-induced, medically induced coma and that he really wasn't in a coma. He was in and out of a coma. In fact, Dr. Potter was quoted as saying, "Conscious but delirious."

Alex Tsakiris: Let's introduce Dr. Laura Potter. Who is she?

Robert Mays: Dr. Potter was the ER physician when Eben Alexander was brought in on that Monday morning. She was in charge of treating him initially, doing the initial diagnostic tests and so on.

Alex Tsakiris: Okay. She's featured very prominently in the *Esquire* article as the medical expert. Quickly, and then go on with your story, who is Dr. Scott Wade?

Robert Mays: He apparently is the lead physician.

Alex Tsakiris: An infectious disease specialist, right?

Robert Mays: Of course you would want that with bacterial meningitis.

Alex Tsakiris: You just said an important word. He's the lead physician, okay? So not to discredit or demean in any way the important role that the ER physician, Dr. Laura Potter, played but there are other medical experts in this case that we'll hear about here today that you certainly didn't hear about in the *Esquire* article.

You were suspicious, as I was, that *hey, wait a minute. The guy had severe spinal meningitis, E. coli bacteria. What is this idea that he wasn't really that ill?* So continue from there.

Robert Mays: How could she have said he was conscious but delirious, given all of the medical facts that were present on the *Skeptiko* website and at the other times Eben Alexander has presented this? So I called the hospital and asked to speak to Dr. Potter and left a message on her voice mail and didn't get a response. I figured that what I had said a few hours later wasn't complete so I called again and left another message. This time I got a secretary, I think, who took the message and said she would definitely want to get that to Dr. Potter. But I didn't hear anything at all.

Over the weekend I called. I was interested in how there could be no rainbow on Sunday morning when the meteorologist said it was clear.

Alex Tsakiris: Okay, let's introduce that again, too. The Dittrich article, you have to read it. It's extremely well-crafted. Let's give them that. And he builds this case with the facts that he has but he really builds this whole thing around *this guy's a liar*. He approaches it from a number of different angles, some of which are really substantive to the story like the coma thing, and these other things that he picks at, but they do kind of stick in your mind as you're reading the article, like the rainbow thing. Tell us what the rainbow thing is all about and then tell us what you found out.

Robert Mays: In the book, on Sunday morning according to the story that Dr. Alexander wrote, his sister, Phyllis, and his mother, Betty, were coming into the hospital and saw a perfect rainbow. They felt this was a sign. Dittrich took this as saying Heaven itself was heralding Eben Alexander's return. Dittrich then asked the meteorologist whether there could have been a rainbow then and the meteorologist said, "Well, the day was clear so there couldn't have been."

I said, "Well, wait a minute. Two people said they saw it." So I called Phyllis Alexander and she said, "Definitely we saw a rainbow. Betty remarked that it was a perfect rainbow." They talked about it. Then they went immediately up to Eben's room and there Eben was, sitting up. So that was the time that he had recovered.

Alex Tsakiris: And just to add a little tidbit that you talk about in your article that I thought was great and is the real kind of journalism that we would have liked to have gotten from *Esquire* is that you not only talked to these eyewitnesses, which he did not—

he just went on some meteorological report—but they also had evidence. It was such a spectacular event that they had written an email. I forget whether it was his sister or whoever but they had email documentation that when they came away that day from the hospital, they wrote someone an email and said, “Wow, there was this great rainbow.” So I mean, that’s...

Robert Mays: Right. That day Phyllis said she had written to friends in Boston who were praying for Eben. She said, “Eben has recovered and I saw a beautiful rainbow as I was coming into the hospital.” So there’s that documentation, as well. So Luke Dittrich’s argument there is empty.

Alex Tsakiris: It’s shoddy journalism. If you’re trying to debunk something, which I’ve run across so many times, that’s one thing. You’re a debunker. You’re just out there throwing whatever you can against the wall and seeing what sticks. But if you’re *Esquire*, who still has some kind of legitimacy as a journalistic enterprise, you have to do more than this. You have to talk to witnesses. You have to get their side of it. I think this lays a pattern for what else we’re about to talk about.

The other point you make right after this in your article is this other fact that becomes controversial, and that’s Dr. Alexander calls out, “Oh my God,” and that becomes an important part of the story. Dittrich seeks to shoot that down. Tell us about that, Robert.

Robert Mays: Dittrich is saying that according to Dr. Potter he couldn’t have yelled that out. In the book it says right before he’s being taken from the emergency room to the ICU he yelled out, “God help me,” and it couldn’t have happened because he was intubated at that time. In fact, he had been intubated for about an hour before he was taken up to ICU. So that couldn’t have happened.

Well, there were two witnesses. Holly Alexander, Eben’s wife and Michael Sullivan, who is an Episcopal minister, who is their neighbor. They were both in the ER at the time. So I called Holly. I talked with her and she said, “Yes, he did say that. In fact, I was standing right outside the curtain.” They had said, “Okay, everybody out because we have to do this procedure.” She and Mr. Sullivan both heard Eben say, “God help me,” as he was struggling with the people who were trying to do this procedure, whatever it was. So they went to the bedside and he was still struggling and was still unconscious. So there it is.

And, of course, that happened before the intubation. So the embellishment that is happening here was for dramatic effect apparently. Oh, it had to be right before he’s taken up to the ICU rather than sometime two hours before that in the ER.

Alex Tsakiris: Right. And this is a minor detail that who knows how it got in there. It’s really not important to the story. I can understand Dr. Potter saying that if she’s asked a certain way, which she was. Let’s get back to that part of the story because it’s crucial, crucial, crucial. It is the point at which the whole article from *Esquire* shifts.

He’s picking around at all these little things and then he hits you with *hey, wait a minute. I talked to the ER physician and she has serious doubts about this guy’s story.* That’s the meme you get from Luke Dittrich is that Laura Potter is totally dissing this

story and saying it couldn't have happened that way and he wasn't really in a coma and he was delirious. He makes the case that that's probably how this story all came about, in this delirium that Alexander was having.

So why don't you pick up from there, Robert? You've said you put a couple calls in to Dr. Potter at this point in the story. You haven't heard back. What happens next?

Robert Mays: I received, from members of the family copies of emails that they had been sending back and forth. Copies of portions, just snippets of emails. In that was a statement that Dr. Potter had apparently made. Later I learned it was a statement that she had issued to a news organization. Apparently that news organization did not use it. In any case, that statement was that she was misquoted and taken out of context. So I said, "Whoa. This is really quite strange."

Alex Tsakiris: And that fact that she felt like her account was misrepresented, that she was much more supportive of Alexander's story than it came out, and that she felt like the questions weren't fair, is backed up by what you heard from the family, right? Because the family talks to Dr. Potter and she's apologizing, saying "Gosh, I don't know how this happened." That's what I took away from your article. Is that what you got from talking to the family?

Robert Mays: Yes. Basically they repeated what Dr. Potter had in this statement. When Dr. Potter finally communicated to me through the public relations person at the hospital, the PR person said, "Dr. Potter wants the statement that I was quoting in the article removed." I said, "Fine." I had contacted the Public Relations Department because Dr. Potter hadn't responded yet and they didn't respond right away. I had to call them three times. Finally, Diane Riley called me back and said she had talked with Dr. Potter and Dr. Potter didn't want me to use quotation in there.

Alex Tsakiris: But she still made that statement and she did express that to the family. I want to make it crystal clear here that we put the responsibility where it belongs and where you put it in your article. That is for Luke Dittrich, who went out there with this piece of work that he did, to back up his claims. You don't talk to one person and then misrepresent them and not go back and say, "Hey, is this really what you said?" You don't go and not talk to the lead physician, Dr. Scott Wade, who still stands by his report that there's no way this guy could have had a functioning brain and that the coma lasted virtually from the time that this thing onset until he was out. The responsibility for this is squarely on *Esquire*.

As you point out, at the very least if you're Luke Dittrich and you think you made this little mistake by accident, great. Publish your notes. Publish your recordings with Dr. Laura Potter. Show us that you didn't twist this into a story to fit your predetermined goal. All the other facts that you're bringing up would really suggest that deliberate distortion was the real goal from the beginning here.

Robert Mays: Right. And basically Dr. Potter expressed to the family that she had been misrepresented and that her words were taken out of context by Luke Dittrich and that he had led her to say certain things. In fact, it was a little more than that. They said that she had expressed to them that he had forced her to say certain things. I didn't

hear that from Dr. Potter but that's what they said to me. It's as if he was leading her in a way that she had to come out and say, "Yes, conscious but delirious," but that isn't really applying to Eben Alexander's case. At least that's my guess. Indeed, he was in a coma.

The question that Luke Dittrich says he posed to her I don't think is a question he actually posed to her when she said, "Yes, conscious but delirious." It would be very interesting to see what exactly happened in that interview and just understand what she was responding to.

Alex Tsakiris: I think it would be more than interesting. I think it's absolutely his responsibility, given the damage that this article has done and sought to do from the beginning. There's an added level of journalistic responsibility to get your facts right. These things being called into question this way demands that he really back up his claims.

Robert Mays: Yes. It's very interesting. Dr. Potter doesn't want to be involved in this anymore. She wants to let it go. We have to respect that so we can't go back to Dr. Potter. But we can, if Luke Dittrich did record this, it would be interesting for the *Esquire* editors to look at what exactly is said and maybe make that available. What was the conversation that he had where Dr. Potter said, "Yes, conscious but delirious?" On that hinges everything of his claim that he wasn't in a bacterial meningitis-induced coma, he was in a medically-induced coma that they brought him out of periodically. Of course, he was thrashing around, "conscious but delirious," and then because he was thrashing around he would be put back into the medically-induced coma. No, he was out the whole time.

Alex Tsakiris: That whole scenario makes for an extremely terrible explanation for this near-death experience. It goes back to the very first thing you said here, Robert, and that's that if you've been around this field for a long time you've seen this over and over again. It's the divide and conquer. *Oh, I can explain that near-death experience this way. Oh, I can explain that near-death experience a completely different way that contradicts the first way but now I've handled that one. And now I've handled this one.*

I think when we talk about this we use words carefully chosen to push people in a certain way. We say, "Was he conscious? Was he delirious?" I think when you read the more medically-oriented explanation to this case what they show is that there was no way on Earth this guy should be having these kinds of experiences that he reported given his medical condition. You want to talk about a coma, conscious, delirious, whatever. His brain was gone, man.

As Dr. Alexander said in that piece that I wrote you, there is no possible way that there could have been any significant brain processing going on when that brain state was that. So I think it's disingenuous when these guys throw around these terms and try to wordsmith it here or there or pick the words apart. The guy had a severely, severely compromised brain. That isn't even controversial. Why isn't that the focus?

Robert Mays: Right. In my article I go into talking about coma and seizures. He was having seizures and that's why he was thrashing around. The electrical activity in his

brain being under attack from the bacteria on the surface of the cortex was causing all kinds of random showers of electrical activity that would cause random muscle movements and could cause vocalizations and so on. That's what was observed.

Also, the other aspects of his coma were measured and he had severe brain damage from the beginning. He was in a Glasgow Coma Scale of eight, indicating severe brain damage and not responsive. Maybe responsive to a painful stimulus but not responsive to talking. Not being verbal at all. Being unconscious. As the days wore on, it got worse and worse. Towards the end, his hands were curling up and his toes were curling up and that's indicating even further into coma. So to say, "Well, he was conscious when he was brought out of sedation or just delirious," is just completely wrong.

Alex Tsakiris: We may never be able to get to the bottom of this; these medical records are very hard to get your hands on. There are privacy issues. There are all sorts of medical liability issues and those kinds of things.

But one final point on your article that we can wrap our arms around because it's very public is Dittrich's spin on Eben Alexander's encounter with the Dali Lama. For anyone who really wants a fact-based analysis of how straight this guy is shooting with you, they can go watch Dr. Alexander's joint presentation with the Dali Lama. So Dittrich really adds that as the capstone kicker to his article and you cover it at the end of yours. Tell us what you found out in that case, Robert.

Robert Mays: Luke Dittrich took the words of the Dali Lama and twisted them to mean exactly the opposite of what the Dali Lama meant. Not only that but this was emblazoned in the article in a pull quote, all caps. "*THE DALI LAMA WAGS A FINGER AT ALEXANDER.*" It says, "*When a man makes extraordinary claims, a thorough investigation is required to ensure that person is reliable and has no reason to lie.*"

Alex Tsakiris: You know what struck me immediately was it's as if Dittrich is signing onto this idea that the Dali Lama has some psychic powers and is reading the soul of Eben Alexander and is telling of this great deceit that he's holding on his soul. I mean, otherwise, how was he even suggesting that the Dali Lama would know what he's suggesting he's saying? Which gets to the heart of the issue which is that's not at all what the Dali Lama was saying. The whole purpose of that presentation was exactly the opposite of what we're led to believe in the *Esquire* article. So please, elaborate on that.

Robert Mays: Well, the Dali Lama heard Eben Alexander's presentation and the first thing that he said was, "*Your explanation on the basis of your own sort of experience is quite—quite amazing.*" If you look at the video, the Dali Lama has an expression where he is really quite amazed. That's at the very beginning. That's the first thing he says. So that tells you he's not making the judgment that Luke Dittrich is saying he's making. The Dali Lama then explains something about how you can have evident phenomena; you can have hidden phenomena that you can infer from indirect measurements; and then you can have extremely hidden phenomena.

Alex Tsakiris: Let me just interject one more time. If someone really listens to the entire presentation by the Dali Lama and also puts it in the context of his previous presentations, it should be crystal clear what he's saying there. He's doing a call to

science to investigate consciousness and investigate these phenomena. He is calling out science in exactly the opposite way that Dittrich is talking about. He's saying, "Hey, get in this game. There's a lot to be investigated here, like this guy has investigated. His is just one way to investigate it."

Robert Mays: Right. So he's saying that with these extremely hidden phenomena where you cannot investigate them directly or even indirectly through normal scientific means, then you have to rely on the testimony of a person who had this experience. But you have to be careful. You have to have a thorough investigation. You have to be sure that the person is reliable and is never telling lies. And then you can take the testimony. It can be credible.

What Luke Dittrich left out was the Dali Lama said, *"Through then thorough investigation that person is reliable, never telling lie, and in this particular case this is no reason to tell lie. Therefore, one can take the testimony to be credible."* Luke Dittrich left that out, *"...and in this particular case this is no reason to tell lie."*

So he's saying, "In this particular case, Eben Alexander, there is no reason to tell a lie." Luke Dittrich turns that around and says, "That person is reliable, never telling lie, and has no reason to lie," but leaves out that the Dali Lama is saying, "In this particular case, Eben Alexander has no reason to lie."

Alex Tsakiris: Obviously, what he's talking about is he's trying to lay the cookie crumbs for science in terms of how to investigate it. You can say, "Why should a spiritual leader be doing that?" But on the other hand, why hasn't science done a better job of that? I think he feels motivated to do this, and I think what he's really contrasting is somebody who just walks in off the street and writes a story about a near-death experience they had 20 years ago. We have no way of knowing, versus in this case we have tons of evidence. The guy was in the hospital. We have all these medical records. I think, as you just pointed out, I think that's what the Dali Lama is alluding to. He's saying, "Hey, in this case we have all this evidence. We know this guy is telling the truth about his medical condition."

Robert Mays: We can rely on his testimony that what he experienced in this transcendent kind of experience, that's reliable. That's credible. By the way, this is exactly what we promote, as well, that the evidence—even in the transcendent aspects of near-death experiences—is valid and actually there is veridical evidence there, as well, that can be traced back to facts on the Earth. So the Dali Lama is saying that for these experiences we have to be sure that we're talking to somebody who's not making it up but then we need to study that.

Alex Tsakiris: Exactly. So, Robert, what has been the reaction so far to the article you've published on the IANDS website?

Robert Mays: Not very much. There have been several people who have written blogs that say, "Yes, this is certainly destroying Luke Dittrich's credibility," but there's been no contact increase from the press. I've sent out a few emails to people who have written articles about Luke Dittrich's article and no response.

Alex Tsakiris: Right. That's to be expected. I should mention that I did try to contact both the editor of *Esquire*, David Granger, and Luke Dittrich. Luke Dittrich got back to me with a very quick email saying that he respectfully declined the interview, to which I said, "Great. No problem. Why don't I just send you five or six questions and you can do an email response?" And I've yet to hear from him. I never will hear from him on that.

You talked at the very beginning about this pattern that we see over and over again. One of the patterns is attack the individual, attack the individual cases, don't ever look at the research as a whole. When Dr. Jeff Long compiles hundreds and hundreds of these cases and does statistical analysis, *aww, it's going to become hard to hit on hundreds of cases; instead, just try and knock down these individual cases.*

Well, another strategy, I think, is get the story out there and then never respond. The follow-up story never gets the traction that the first story gets.

Robert Mays: Right. But in a way, if the skeptics have got their catch-phrase about Eben Alexander now and whenever that catch-phrase is brought up, then my article can be used as a counter.

Alex Tsakiris: At least there's that. Hopefully, people who really want to investigate and really do want to nudge a little bit closer to the truth, whatever that means to them, they can follow the path. It's really not up to us or anyone else to convince someone or try and win them over. All we can do is lay the data out there and let people have their own journey through it. To that extent, you and Suzanne have done a great service in both upping the ante in terms of journalistic integrity and maybe exposing the larger picture of what's going on with this culture war battle about consciousness and survival of consciousness. This is really what's at the heart of this whole thing.

Great work. Thanks again so much for this article. We'll be sure to post it along with a link to your excellent website where people can check out many of your other interesting presentations. You have some great YouTube presentations that you've done, as well as the writing that you and Suzanne have done. We'll be sure to mention that. Is there anything else we should mention?

Robert Mays: No, other than Suzanne and I are going to be presenting a workshop at the IANDS Conference in a week.

Alex Tsakiris: Where is that at?

Robert Mays: That's in Arlington, Virginia at the Sheraton Crystal City Hotel on August 30th. We're talking about solving the mystery of consciousness through near-death experiences. We have another researcher, Kenny Arnette, who is going to be presenting with us and we're hoping that Eben Alexander, who will be at the conference, will at least come in and join the discussion, if not to actually present part of it. We've asked him that and hopefully he can do that.

In any case, if anybody's interested in that, they can get the information on the IANDS website, www.ians.org.

Alex Tsakiris: Great. We'll link people up to that, as well. It's been great talking to you. Again, congratulations on this excellent work that you've done. Thanks again so much for joining me today.

Robert Mays: Thank you for having me.

[End of Audio]

The following is from an email sent by Dr. Eben Alexander explaining his medical condition (from [189. Sam Harris Won't Debate Dr. Eben Alexander on Near-Death Experience Science](#)):

Eben Alexander: Isolated preservation of cortical regions might have explained some elements of my experience, but certainly not the overall odyssey of rich experiential tapestry. The severity of my meningitis and its refractoriness to therapy for a week should have eliminated all but the most rudimentary of conscious experiences: peripheral white blood cell [WBC] count over 27,000 per mm³, 31 percent bands with toxic granulations, CSF WBC count over 4,300 per mm³, CSF glucose down to 1.0 mg/dl (normally 60-80, may drop down to ~ 20 in severe meningitis), CSF protein 1,340 mg/dl, diffuse meningeal involvement and widespread blurring of the gray-white junction, diffuse edema, with associated brain abnormalities revealed on my enhanced CT scan, and neurological exams showing severe alterations in cortical function (from posturing to no response to noxious stimuli, florid papilledema, and dysfunction of extraocular motility [no doll's eyes, pupils fixed], indicative of brainstem damage). Going from symptom onset to coma within 3 hours is a very dire prognostic sign, conferring 90% mortality at the very beginning, which only worsened over the week. No physician who knows anything about meningitis will just "blow off" the fact that I was deathly ill in every sense of the word, and that my neocortex was absolutely hammered. Anyone who simply concludes that "since I did so well I could not have been that sick" is begging the question, and knows nothing whatsoever about severe bacterial meningitis.

I invite the skeptical doctors to show me a case remotely similar to mine. My physicians, and their consultants at UVA, Bowman Gray-Wake Forest, Duke, Harvard, Stanford and beyond were astonished that I recovered.

In an effort to explain the "ultra-reality" of the experience, I examined this hypothesis: Was it possible that networks of inhibitory neurons might have been predominantly affected, allowing for unusually high levels of activity among the excitatory neuronal networks to generate the apparent "ultra-reality" of my experience? One would expect meningitis to preferentially disturb the superficial cortex, possibly leaving deeper layers partially functional. The computing unit of the neocortex is the six-layered "functional column," each with a lateral diameter of 0.2–0.3 mm. There is significant interwiring laterally to immediately adjacent columns in response to modulatory control signals that originate largely from subcortical regions (the thalamus, basal ganglia, and brainstem). Each functional column has a component at the surface (layers 1–3), so that meningitis effectively disrupts the function of each column just by damaging the surface layers of the cortex. The anatomical distribution of inhibitory and excitatory cells, which have a

fairly balanced distribution within the six layers, does not support this hypothesis. Diffuse meningitis over the brain's surface effectively disables the entire neocortex due to this columnar architecture. Full-thickness destruction is unnecessary for total functional disruption. Given the prolonged course of my poor neurological function (seven days) and the severity of my infection, it is unlikely that even deeper layers of the cortex were still functioning in more than isolated pockets of small networks.

The thalamus, basal ganglia, and brainstem are deeper brain structures ("subcortical regions") that some colleagues postulated might have contributed to the processing of such hyperreal experiences. In fact, all agreed that none of those structures could play any such role without having at least some regions of the neocortex still functional. All agreed in the end that such subcortical structures alone could not have handled the intense neural calculations required for such a richly interactive experiential tapestry.

There are 9 hypotheses discussed in an appendix of my book that I derived based on conversations with colleagues. None of them explained the hyper-reality in any brain-based fashion.

WAS INFORMATION ABOUT THE NEUROSURGEON'S CREDIBILITY WITHHELD?

Professional issues that have gone relatively under the radar until now are also mentioned in the Esquire piece. According to Dittrich, Alexander's career has been colored by numerous lawsuits over the past decade. It is also alleged that the doctor attempted to hide surgery errors by altering patient records.

Over the course of the past 12 years, he has apparently worked at three separate hospitals, but his employment has ended without explanation at each location. Here's a sample surrounding [his departure from one of the hospitals](#) he once worked at:

In August 2003, UMass Memorial suspended Alexander's surgical privileges "on the basis or allegation of improper performance of surgery." (The specifics of the case leading to the suspension are confidential, though Alexander claims it resulted from "a very complex repeat operation I did around the brain stem of a patient in which the patient had more difficulty recovering after the operation I would say than I anticipated and than I led them to believe.") His suspension technically ended in November of that same year, but he never went back to work at UMass Memorial. He resigned. The following year he did a little freelance consulting for the Gerson Lehrman Group, a company that matches corporations with experts in various fields, and also filed an unsuccessful lawsuit against the Brigham and Women's Hospital, claiming it improperly withheld more than \$400,000 of his retirement and deferred-compensation plans. He had been more or less out of work for fifteen months when, in March 2005, he received a letter from the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Medicine asking him to respond to a complaint form they'd received from a former patient who was upset that Alexander had stopped responding to phone calls. Alexander wrote a letter back, explaining that the complaint was invalid because he was no longer practicing and that, furthermore, he would soon be leaving the state altogether.

This Must Be Heaven



SAM HARRIS CRITIQUE, link:

<http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/this-must-be-heaven>

Once upon a time, a neurosurgeon named Eben Alexander contracted a bad case of bacterial meningitis and fell into a coma. While immobile in his hospital bed, he experienced visions of such intense beauty that they changed everything—not just for him, but for all of us, and for science as a whole. According to *Newsweek*, Alexander’s experience proves that consciousness is independent of the brain, that death is an illusion, and that an eternity of perfect splendor awaits us beyond the grave—complete with the usual angels, clouds, and departed relatives, but also butterflies and beautiful girls in peasant dress. Our current understanding of the mind “now lies broken at our feet”—for, as the doctor writes, “What happened to me destroyed it, and I intend to spend the rest of my life investigating the true

nature of consciousness and making the fact that we are more, much more, than our physical brains as clear as I can, both to my fellow scientists and to people at large.”

Well, I intend to spend the rest of the morning sparing him the effort. Whether you read it online or hold the physical object in your hands, this issue of *Newsweek* is best viewed as an archaeological artifact that is certain to embarrass us in the eyes of future generations. Its existence surely says more about our time than the editors at the magazine meant to say—for the cover alone reveals the abasement and desperation of our journalism, the intellectual bankruptcy and resultant tenacity of faith-based religion, and our ubiquitous confusion about the nature of scientific authority. The article is the modern equivalent of a 14th-century woodcut depicting the work of alchemists, inquisitors, Crusaders, and fortune-tellers. I hope our descendants understand that at least some of us were blushing.

As many of you know, I am interested in “spiritual” experiences of the sort Alexander reports. Unlike many atheists, I don’t doubt the *subjective* phenomena themselves—that is, I don’t believe that everyone who claims to have seen an angel, or left his body in a trance, or become one with the universe, is lying or mentally ill. Indeed, **I have had similar experiences myself in meditation, in lucid dreams (even while meditating in a lucid dream), and through the use of various psychedelics (in times gone by)**. I know that astonishing changes in the contents of consciousness are possible and can be psychologically transformative.

And, unlike many neuroscientists and philosophers, I remain agnostic on the question of how consciousness is related to the physical world. There are, of course, very good reasons to believe that it is an emergent property of brain activity, just as the rest of the human mind obviously is. But we know nothing about how such a miracle of emergence might occur. And if consciousness were, in fact, irreducible—or even separable from the brain in a way that would give comfort to Saint Augustine—my worldview would not be overturned. I know that we do not understand consciousness, and nothing that I think I know about the cosmos, or about the patent falsity of most religious beliefs, requires that I deny this. So, although I am an atheist who can be expected to be unforgiving of religious dogma, I am not

reflexively hostile to claims of the sort Alexander has made. In principle, my mind is open. (It really is.)

But Alexander's account is so bad—his reasoning so lazy and tendentious—that it would be beneath notice if not for the fact that it currently disgraces the cover of a major newsmagazine. Alexander is also releasing a book at the end of the month, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife*, which seems destined to become an instant bestseller. As much as I would like to simply ignore the unfolding travesty, it would be derelict of me to do so.

But first things first: You really must read [Alexander's article](#).

I trust that doing so has given you cause to worry that the good doctor is just another casualty of American-style Christianity—for though he claims to have been a nonbeliever before his adventures in coma, he presents the following self-portrait:

Although I considered myself a faithful Christian, I was so more in name than in actual belief. I didn't begrudge those who wanted to believe that Jesus was more than simply a good man who had suffered at the hands of the world. I sympathized deeply with those who wanted to believe that there was a God somewhere out there who loved us unconditionally. In fact, I envied such people the security that those beliefs no doubt provided. But as a scientist, I simply knew better than to believe them myself.

What it means to be a "faithful Christian" without "actual belief" is not spelled out, but few nonbelievers will be surprised when our hero's scientific skepticism proves no match for his religious conditioning. Most of us have been around this block often enough to know that many "former atheists"—like Francis Collins—spent so long on the brink of faith, and yearned for its emotional consolations with such vampiric intensity, that the slightest breeze would send them spinning into the abyss. For Collins, you may recall, all it took to establish the divinity of Jesus and the coming resurrection of the dead was the sight of a frozen waterfall. Alexander seems to have required a ride on a psychedelic butterfly. In either case, it's not the perception of beauty we should begrudge but the utter absence of intellectual seriousness with which the author interprets it.

Everything—*absolutely everything*—in Alexander’s account rests on repeated assertions that his visions of heaven occurred while his cerebral cortex was “shut down,” “inactivated,” “completely shut down,” “totally offline,” and “stunned to complete inactivity.”

The evidence he provides for this claim is not only inadequate—it suggests that he doesn’t know anything about the relevant brain science. Perhaps he has saved a more persuasive account for his book—though now that I’ve listened to [an hour-long interview](#) with him online, I very much doubt it. In his *Newsweek* article, Alexander asserts that the cessation of cortical activity was “clear from the severity and duration of my meningitis, and from the global cortical involvement documented by CT scans and neurological examinations.” To his editors, this presumably sounded like neuroscience.

The problem, however, is that **“CT scans and neurological examinations” can’t determine neuronal inactivity—in the cortex or anywhere else.** And Alexander makes no reference to functional data that might have been acquired by **fMRI, PET, or EEG—nor does he seem to realize that only this sort of evidence could support his case.** Obviously, the man’s cortex is functioning now—he has, after all, written a book—so whatever structural damage appeared on CT could not have been “global.” (Otherwise, he would be claiming that his entire cortex was destroyed and then grew back.) **Coma is not associated with the complete cessation of cortical activity,** in any case. And to my knowledge, almost no one thinks that consciousness is purely a matter of cortical activity. Alexander’s unwarranted assumptions are proliferating rather quickly. Why doesn’t he know these things? He is, after all, a neurosurgeon who survived a coma and now claims to be upending the scientific worldview on the basis of the fact that his cortex was totally quiescent at the precise moment he was enjoying the best day of his life in the company of angels. **Even if his entire cortex had truly shut down (again, an incredible claim), how can he know that his visions didn’t occur in the minutes and hours during which its functions returned?**

I confess that I found Alexander's account so alarmingly unscientific that I began to worry that something had gone wrong with my own brain. So I sought the opinion of [Mark Cohen](#), a pioneer in the field of neuro-imaging who holds appointments in the Departments of Psychiatry & Bio-behavioral Science, Neurology, Psychology, Radiological Science, and Bioengineering at UCLA. (He was also my thesis advisor.) Here is part of what he had to say:

This poetic interpretation of his experience is not supported by evidence of any kind. As you correctly point out, **coma does not equate to "inactivation of the cerebral cortex" or "higher-order brain functions totally offline" or "neurons of [my] cortex stunned into complete inactivity". These describe brain death, a one hundred percent lethal condition.** There are many excellent scholarly articles that discuss the definitions of coma. (For example: [1](#) & [2](#))

We are not privy to his EEG records, but **high alpha activity is common in coma.** Also common is "flat" EEG. **The EEG can appear flat even in the presence of high activity, when that activity is not synchronous.** For example, the EEG flattens in regions involved in direct task processing. This phenomenon is known as event-related de-synchronization (hundreds of references).

As is obvious to you, this is truth by authority. Neurosurgeons, however, are rarely well-trained in brain function. Dr. Alexander cuts brains; he does not appear to study them.

"There is no scientific explanation for the fact that while my body lay in coma, my mind—my conscious, inner self—was alive and well. While the neurons of my cortex were stunned to complete inactivity by the bacteria that had attacked them, my brain-free consciousness ..."

True, science cannot explain brain-free consciousness. Of course, science cannot explain consciousness anyway. In this case, however, it would be parsimonious to reject the whole idea of consciousness in the absence of brain activity. **Either his brain was active when he had these dreams, or**

they are a confabulation of whatever took place in his state of minimally conscious coma.

There are many reports of people remembering dream-like states while in medical coma. They lack consistency, of course, but there is nothing particularly unique in Dr. Alexander's unfortunate episode.

Okay, so it appears that my own cortex hasn't completely shut down. In fact, there are further problems with Alexander's account. Not only does he appear ignorant of the relevant science, but he doesn't realize how many people have experienced visions similar to his while their brains were operational. In his [online interview](#) we learn about the kinds of conversations he's now having with skeptics:

I guess one could always argue, "Well, your brain was probably just barely able to ignite real consciousness and then it would flip back into a very diseased state," which doesn't make any sense to me. Especially because that hyper-real state is so indescribable and so crisp. It's totally unlike any drug experience. A lot of people have come up to me and said, "Oh that sounds like a DMT experience," or "That sounds like ketamine." Not at all. That is not even in the right ballpark.

Those things do not explain the kind of clarity, the rich interactivity, the layer upon layer of understanding and of lessons taught by deceased loved ones and spiritual beings.

"Not even in the right ballpark"? His experience sounds so much like a DMT trip that we are not only in the right ballpark, we are talking about the stitching on the same ball. Here is Alexander's description of the afterlife:

I was a speck on a beautiful butterfly wing; millions of other butterflies around us. We were flying through blooming flowers, blossoms on trees, and they were all coming out as we flew through them... [there were] waterfalls, pools of water, indescribable colors, and above there were these arcs of silver and gold light and beautiful hymns coming down from them.

Indescribably gorgeous hymns. I later came to call them “angels,” those arcs of light in the sky. I think that word is probably fairly accurate....

Then we went out of this universe. I remember just seeing everything receding and initially I felt as if my awareness was in an infinite black void. It was very comforting but I could feel the extent of the infinity and that it was, as you would expect, impossible to put into words. I was there with that Divine presence that was not anything that I could visibly see and describe, and with a brilliant orb of light....

They said there were many things that they would show me, and they continued to do that. In fact, the whole higher-dimensional multiverse was this incredibly complex corrugated ball and all these lessons coming into me about it. Part of the lessons involved becoming all of what I was being shown. It was indescribable.

But then I would find myself—and time out there I can say is totally different from what we call time. There was access from out there to any part of our space/time and that made it difficult to understand a lot of these memories because we always try to sequence things and put them in linear form and description. That just really doesn't work.

Everything that Alexander describes here and in his *Newsweek* article, including the parts I have left out, has been reported by DMT users. The similarity is uncanny. Here is how the late Terence McKenna described the prototypical DMT trance:

Under the influence of DMT, the world becomes an Arabian labyrinth, a palace, a more than possible Martian jewel, vast with motifs that flood the gaping mind with complex and wordless awe. Color and the sense of a reality-unlocking secret nearby pervade the experience. There is a sense of other times, and of one's own infancy, and of wonder, wonder and more wonder. It is an audience with the alien nuncio. In the midst of this experience, apparently at the end of human history, guarding gates that seem surely to open on the howling maelstrom of the unspeakable emptiness between the stars, is the Aeon.

The Aeon, as Heraclitus presciently observed, is a child at play with colored balls. Many diminutive beings are present there—the tykes, the self-

transforming machine elves of hyperspace. Are they the children destined to be father to the man? One has the impression of entering into an ecology of souls that lies beyond the portals of what we naively call death. I do not know. Are they the synesthetic embodiment of ourselves as the Other, or of the Other as ourselves? Are they the elves lost to us since the fading of the magic light of childhood? Here is a tremendum barely to be told, an epiphany beyond our wildest dreams. Here is the realm of that which is stranger than we *can* suppose. Here is the mystery, alive, unscathed, still as new for us as when our ancestors lived it fifteen thousand summers ago. The tryptamine entities offer the gift of new language, they sing in pearly voices that rain down as colored petals and flow through the air like hot metal to become toys and such gifts as gods would give their children. The sense of emotional connection is terrifying and intense. The Mysteries revealed are real and if ever fully told will leave no stone upon another in the small world we have gone so ill in.

This is not the mercurial world of the UFO, to be invoked from lonely hilltops; this is not the siren song of lost Atlantis wailing through the trailer courts of crack-crazed America. DMT is not one of our irrational illusions. I believe that what we experience in the presence of DMT is real news. It is a nearby dimension—frightening, transformative, and beyond our powers to imagine, and yet to be explored in the usual way. We must send fearless experts, whatever that may come to mean, to explore and to report on what they find. (Terence McKenna, *Food of the Gods*, pp. 258-259.)

Alexander believes that his *E. coli*-addled brain could not have produced his visions because they were too “intense,” too “hyper-real,” too “beautiful,” too “interactive,” and too drenched in significance for even a healthy brain to conjure. **He also appears to think that despite their timeless quality, his visions could not have arisen in the minutes or hours during which his cortex (which surely never went off) switched back on.** He clearly knows nothing about what people with working brains experience under the influence of psychedelics. Nor does he know that **visions of the sort that McKenna describes, although they may seem to last for ages, require only a brief span of biological time.** Unlike LSD and other long-acting psychedelics, DMT alters consciousness for merely a few minutes.

Alexander would have had more than enough time to experience a visionary ecstasy as he was coming out of his coma (whether his cortex was rebooting or not).

Does Alexander know that DMT already exists in the brain as a neurotransmitter? Did his brain experience a surge of DMT release during his coma? This is pure speculation, of course, but it is a far more credible hypothesis than that his cortex “shut down,” freeing his soul to travel to another dimension. As one of his correspondents has already informed him, similar experiences can be had with ketamine, which is a surgical anesthetic that is occasionally used to protect a traumatized brain. Did Alexander by any chance *receive ketamine* while in the hospital? Would he even think it relevant if he had? His assertion that psychedelics like DMT and ketamine “do not explain the kind of clarity, the rich interactivity, the layer upon layer of understanding” he experienced is perhaps the most amazing thing he has said since he returned from heaven. Such compounds are universally understood to do the job. And most scientists believe that the reliable effects of psychedelics indicate that the brain is at the very least *involved* in the production of visionary states of the sort Alexander is talking about.

Again, there is nothing to be said against Alexander’s experience. It sounds perfectly sublime. And such ecstasies do tell us something about how good a human mind can feel. The problem is that the conclusions Alexander has drawn from his experience—he continually reminds us, as a *scientist*—are based on some very obvious errors in reasoning and gaps in his understanding.

Let me suggest that, whether or not heaven exists, Alexander sounds precisely how a scientist should *not* sound when he doesn’t know what he is talking about. And his article is not the sort of thing that the editors of a once-important magazine should publish if they hope to reclaim some measure of respect for their battered brand.

Wikipedia excerpt:

Criticism [\[edit\]](#)

In a wide-ranging investigation of Alexander's story and medical background, [Esquire](#) magazine reported (August 2013 issue) that prior to the publication of *Proof of Heaven*, Alexander had been:

“...terminated or suspended from multiple hospital positions, and had been the subject of several malpractice lawsuits, including at least two involving the alteration of medical records to cover up a [medical error](#).^{[6][7]}”

The magazine also found what it claimed were discrepancies with regard to Alexander's version of events in the book. Among the discrepancies, according to an account of the *Esquire* article in [Forbes](#), was that **"Alexander writes that he slipped into the coma as a result of severe bacterial meningitis and had no higher brain activity, while a doctor who cared for him says the coma was medically induced and the patient was conscious, though hallucinating."**^{[6][7][8]}

Alexander issued a statement after the *Esquire* article's publication: "I wrote a truthful account of my experiences in PROOF OF HEAVEN and have acknowledged in the book both my professional and personal accomplishments and my setbacks. I stand by every word in this book and have made its message the purpose of my life. *Esquire's* cynical article distorts the facts of my 25-year career as a neurosurgeon and is a textbook example of how unsupported assertions and cherry-picked information can be assembled at the expense of the truth."^[8]

Alexander's book and publicity campaign have been criticized by scientists, including [neuroscientist Sam Harris](#), who described Alexander's NDE account (chronicled in *Newsweek*, October 2012) as “alarmingly unscientific,” and that “everything — *absolutely everything* — in Alexander's account rests on repeated assertions that his visions of heaven occurred while his [cerebral cortex](#) was 'shut down,' 'inactivated,' 'completely shut down,' 'totally offline,' and 'stunned to complete inactivity.' The evidence he provides for this claim is not only inadequate — it suggests that he doesn't know anything about the relevant brain science.”^[9]

“Even in cases where the brain is alleged to have shut down, its activity must return if the subject is to survive and describe the experience. In such cases, there is generally no way to establish that the NDE occurred while the brain was offline.”

^[10] [Neurologist](#) and writer [Oliver Sacks](#) agreed with Harris, saying that "to deny the possibility of any natural explanation for an NDE, as Dr. Alexander does, is more than unscientific — it is antiscientific."...

"The one most plausible hypothesis in Dr. Alexander's case...is that his NDE occurred not during his coma, but as he was surfacing from the coma and his cortex was returning to full function.

It is curious that he does not allow this obvious and natural explanation, but instead insists on a supernatural one."^[11]

In November 2012, Alexander responded to critics in a second *Newsweek* article: "My synapses—the spaces between the neurons of the brain that support the electrochemical activity that makes the brain function — were not simply compromised during my experience. They were stopped. Only isolated pockets of deep cortical neurons were still sputtering, but no broad networks capable of generating anything like what we call 'consciousness.' The E. coli bacteria that flooded my brain during my illness made sure of that. My doctors have told me that according to all the brain tests they were doing, there was no way that any of the functions including vision, hearing, emotion, memory, language, or logic could possibly have been intact."^[12]

findings are now generally accepted by the scientific and medical mainstream. Other research teams around the world did studies which supported our research, and recently, the United Nations is sponsoring a twenty-five medical center study on NDEs.

We then moved on to try to understand how it would be possible that a dying brain could somehow have a real experience of seeing and being in another world, a "heaven." I trained at Johns Hopkins Medical School, and I assure you that my professors would have failed me instead of giving me awards and honors if they knew that is what I would end up trying to prove. It seems completely unscientific. The "Gods" that I worshipped at the time wrote books that said things like "coma wipes clean the slate of consciousness," and "when you are dead, you are dead and consciousness ends."

These children lived their lives far differently after nearly dying. They became little mini-mystics, transformed by that Light they briefly touched in death. They did not want to die although they were unafraid of death. Instead, they wanted to live life completely.

"Life is for living, and the Light is for later," one of them said to me.