

Esquire article on Eben Alexander distorts the facts

Commentary by [NDE researcher Robert Mays](#) – revised August 21, 2013



[Luke Dittrich](#), contributing editor at *Esquire*, wrote [an article](#) critical of Dr. Eben Alexander's book [Proof of Heaven](#). Dittrich cited several malpractice lawsuits against Dr. Alexander, in some of which the allegation was that Alexander had **altered medical records to cover his errors**. Dittrich makes this his theme for critiquing the story of Alexander's NDE, that **Alexander altered the facts of his story to make them more**



dramatic. In particular, **Dittrich questioned the central premise of the book**, that Alexander's experience was the result of a **brain all but destroyed by meningitis**. Alexander's **hyper-real experience** of the heavenly **Gateway Realm** with the beautiful girl on the butterfly wing and the knowledge he gained from **The Core**, were **all hallucinations resulting from a medically induced coma**. Alexander thereby stood to gain financially. **But how careful was Luke Dittrich with the facts he presented?**

Luke Dittrich is an award-winning writer. He was named writer of the year by the City and Regional Magazine Association in 2004 and his article about a group of strangers who sheltered together during a tornado won the 2012 National Magazine Award for Feature Writing. Undoubtedly his article on Eben Alexander will be similarly recognized.

Esquire's Editor in Chief David Granger says that stories like Dittrich's matter—they are great journalism. And since great journalism isn't free, *Esquire* has asked on-line readers to pay \$1.99 to access the story.

Three key flaws in Alexander's story

Dittrich pointed out three key places in Alexander's account of his experience that were not confirmed upon examination—a rainbow heralding Alexander's return that could not have been seen, a shout for help noted by everyone present that could not have been uttered, and, most damning of all, the assertion of a hyper-real experience of incredible beauty, love and wisdom that could not have occurred in a medically induced coma. The first two flaws could perhaps be excused by the pressure to produce a dramatic story, one that would generate interest and sell well, taking as Alexander admitted to Dr. Laura Potter, his ER physician, some "artistic license."

But the last flaw would be fatal because Eben Alexander's central assertion is that his experience occurred during a week-long coma brought on by severe bacterial meningitis. Alexander's medical records are all confidential. Even with Alexander's permission, his doctors refused to be interviewed, except for Dr. Potter. So all Dittrich has to go on are Dr. Potter's statements and Eben Alexander's assertions. Dittrich felt that Alexander's history of altering medical records to achieve a desired result called into question everything he would assert about his medical condition. Indeed, as we shall see, Dr. Potter's statements were apparently pretty damning.

Eben Alexander's response

In response to Dittrich's exposé, Dr. Alexander issued the following statement:

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.

The heralding rainbow that could not have been witnessed

On Sunday morning, November 16, 2008, after several days of relentless rain, the rain stopped. Eben Alexander was coming out of his coma. Eben Alexander's sister Phyllis and their 87-year-old mother, Betty, were on their way into the hospital (Betty was in a wheelchair) when they saw a "perfect rainbow" toward the distant peaks. Dittrich commented, "It was as though heaven itself was cheering Alexander's return."

Only that could not have happened. [NOAA](#) meteorologist Dave Wert checked the weather records for the sixteenth—it was a clear day. Could there have been a rainbow the morning of the sixteenth? "No," he says.

For Dittrich, this is clearly an open-and-shut case of embellishment. Of course, the rainbow wasn't observed by Alexander, since he was just coming out of coma. Alexander was either told this purported fact by Phyllis or he just made it up to give a nice twist to the story.

Why investigate further? The meteorologist's pronouncement is definitive after all: no rainbow would have been possible on that morning. Therefore it must be a fabrication by Alexander.

In fact, if Dittrich had interviewed Phyllis, she would have told him: she and her mother saw a rainbow as they were entering the hospital about 1 PM. It was to the right of the entrance (north of the hospital) where there are mountains. They commented on the rainbow and Betty noted, "It's a perfect rainbow!" When they turned the corner into Eben's ICU room a few moments later, Eben was sitting up in bed.

Later that day, Phyllis emailed friends back in Boston, telling them about Eben's miraculous recovery—and about the rainbow she and her mother had witnessed. She offered to show me the email.

So how can we reconcile a two-person eyewitness account with contemporaneous corroborative documentation and an expert meteorologist's pronouncement? Could Phyllis Alexander and her mother have been mistaken? "No," Phyllis replies, "we both saw it. If I'd known I'd be 'on trial' about it later, I would have taken a picture of it."

An [ordinary rainbow](#)—one following a rainstorm—would be very unusual on an apparently clear day at 1 PM in November. However, there are many ways for a rainbow to occur. In any case, a rainbow was clearly seen on that Sunday morning when Eben Alexander came out of coma. He was told about it later. He did not fabricate the story or embellish the details as Dittrich implies.

Alexander's sister Phyllis was always one phone call away, as she was when I phoned her. Alexander's account clearly states that Phyllis witnessed a rainbow on that specific day. Considering that Dittrich was calling into question a man's integrity and honesty, he should have investigated this further, to corroborate with other sources, to get to the bottom of the apparent contradiction.

The shout for help that could not have been uttered

In one of the book's most dramatic scenes, Dr. Laura Potter prepares Alexander to move from the ER to the ICU. In those final moments, after two straight hours of struggle—thrashing and guttural groans and wails—Eben Alexander grows quiet and shouts out, for everyone present to hear, "God, help me!" The doctors, nurses, his wife Holley and his neighbor Michael Sullivan, an Episcopal rector, rush to his stretcher, but Alexander remains completely unresponsive.

Dramatic, but it could not have happened. Dr. Potter has no recollection of the incident but she does remember that she intubated Alexander more than an hour before his departure from the ER. Could he have shouted anything, let alone something clearly heard? "No," she says.

For Dittrich, another clearly open-and-shut case of embellishment or fabrication. Of course, at the time Alexander was in a coma, so he was either told this purported fact by Holley or someone else, or he just made it up to give another dramatic, emotional twist to the story.

Again, why investigate further? The facts given by Dr. Potter are crystal clear and make complete sense: the intubation would almost certainly be done in the ER and Alexander's status stabilized before transferring to the ICU. Therefore it must be another fabrication by Alexander.

In fact, if Dittrich had asked her, Holley would have confirmed the story: indeed, at some time in the ER Eben had shouted out "God, help me!" and everyone present including Holley and Michael Sullivan had rushed to his side—Holley had been just outside the curtain—but Alexander fell back unresponsive. Those present were given hope that he was recovering, but those hopes faded quickly.

I spoke with Holley Alexander recently. She said that this incident occurred about an hour or so after she had arrived in the ER with Eben. "It happened before they sedated him, while the doctors were trying to get vital signs and spinal fluid and all that. I said to Michael [Sullivan], 'He spoke!' and Eben kept writhing. Dr. Potter might not have heard it. She was in and out, checking scans, spinal fluid, so it's very likely that she wasn't there."

And yes, this happened *before* Alexander was intubated, so Eben Alexander's only embellishment was to fudge the timing of the incident, for dramatic effect—a trivial adjustment.

During the many hours Luke Dittrich spent talking to Eben Alexander in his home, he could easily have asked Holley, who was present the whole time, about this incident. He did not. Perhaps Dittrich suspected collusion between Eben and Holley, so her account of the facts would not have been reliable. Still he could have talked to their neighbor and Episcopal rector Michael Sullivan. Again he did not.

Now we have two of the three key flaws in Eben Alexander's story that have turned out to be trivial. But it's not trivial that Luke Dittrich is relying on these apparent inconsistencies to build a case that Alexander's story is a complete fabrication, a hallucination, a fantasy.

All it would have taken was a simple conversation with two of the people identified in *Proof of Heaven* as witnesses to corroborate or refute Alexander's account. In both cases, Luke Dittrich would have found complete corroboration of Alexander's portrayal of the rainbow and nearly complete corroboration of the shout in the ER.

Journalists and their editors have a duty to investigate and report the facts objectively and accurately. It appears in these first two cases that Luke Dittrich and his editors failed in this duty.

The hyper-real experience that could not have occurred in a medically induced coma

Luke Dittrich's interpretation of *Proof of Heaven* hinges most on the question of coma. [Coma](#) is a state of unconsciousness lasting more than six hours, in which a person: cannot be awakened; fails to respond normally to painful stimuli, light, or sound; lacks a normal sleep-wake cycle; and, does not initiate voluntary actions. In order to maintain consciousness, a person needs to have a perfectly functioning cerebral cortex and brainstem.

Was Eben Alexander conscious during any of his stay in the hospital? Not according to Alexander's account—he was out when he lost consciousness in his home after shouting to his son, "Have a good day at school", probably around 8 AM on Monday, until he awoke the next Sunday morning probably around 9 AM.

Eben Alexander had developed a severe case of bacterial meningitis. There were lots of measures of how serious his condition was: the very quick onset of his symptoms, persistent seizure (*status epilepticus*), the presence of *E. coli* bacteria in his [cerebral spinal fluid](#) (CSF), the high white blood cell count and high protein level in his CSF, the

very low glucose level in his CSF, and the [CT scans](#) of his brain that showed diffuse [edema](#), damage in all eight lobes of his cortex and widespread blurring of the [gray-white junction](#).

And there were several specific neurological exams showing severe alterations: [abnormal posturing](#) indicating damage to the cortex and thalamus, [florid papilledema](#) indicating elevated intracranial pressure, [fixed pupils](#) indicating brainstem damage, and no [vestibulo-ocular reflex](#) also indicating brainstem damage. Alexander's [motor response](#) declined further to "no motor response to noxious stimuli," indicating widespread cortical and brainstem damage.

Yes, Eben Alexander's medical records are all confidential. But Alexander published these results in an article, "My Experience in Coma", in *AANS Neurosurgeon*, [located here](#) and also released these results for a podcast interview on [Skeptiko.com](#), [located here](#). Dittrich surely had access to both sources.

The most important indicator of Alexander's coma state was his [Glasgow Coma Scale](#) (GCS) score of 8 (p. 25 in *Proof of Heaven*). The Glasgow Coma Scale ranges from 15 (fully conscious) to 3 (deep coma). A score of 8 is below the midpoint and indicates "[severe brain injury](#)" and a state of coma. Eben Alexander had a GCS of 8 on admission.

But Luke Dittrich focuses on the fact that Alexander was groaning and flailing about and had to be placed in a chemically induced coma. Dittrich recounts how Dr. Potter described it:

"We couldn't work with Eben at all, we couldn't get vital signs, he just was not able to comply. So I had to make the decision to just place him in a chemically induced coma. Really for his own safety, until we could treat him. And so I did.... I put him to sleep, if you will, and put him on life support."

After Alexander was taken from the ER to the ICU, Potter says, the doctors there administered anesthetics that kept him in the coma. The next day, she went to visit him.

"And of course he was still in an induced coma," she says. "On ventilator support. They tried to let him wake up and see what he would do, but he was in exactly the same agitated state. Even if they tried to ease up, a little bit even, on the sedation. In fact, for days, every time they would try to wean his sedation—just thrashing, trying to scream, and grabbing at his tube."

So, on the basis of these statements Dittrich concluded that Alexander's coma was induced and maintained *solely* by anesthetics:

In *Proof of Heaven*, Alexander writes that he spent seven days in "a coma caused by a rare case of *E. coli* bacterial meningitis." **There is no indication in the book that it was Laura Potter, and not bacterial meningitis, that induced his coma, or that the physicians in the ICU maintained his coma in the days that followed through the use of anesthetics.** (emphasis added)

This point goes to the heart of Eben Alexander's story, because according to Alexander he didn't have a working brain and therefore his memories couldn't have been hallucinations. Dittrich continues:

[Alexander] notes that by conventional scientific understanding, "if you don't have a working brain, you can't be conscious," and a key point of his argument for the reality of the realms he claims to have visited is that **his memories could not have been hallucinations, since he didn't possess a brain capable of creating even a hallucinatory conscious experience.** (emphasis added)

So was Eben Alexander conscious during his stay in the hospital? Dittrich describes the key question:

I ask Potter whether the manic, agitated state that Alexander exhibited whenever they weaned him off his anesthetics during his first days of coma **would meet her definition of conscious**.

"Yes," she says. "**Conscious but delirious.**" (emphasis added)

There it is: for Dittrich, conclusive proof that Eben Alexander was conscious, although severely sick, and was maintained in a medically induced coma by administration of anesthetics. ***And Eben Alexander failed to disclose that key fact in his book.***

This is the final incontrovertible evidence Dittrich needed to complete his exposure of Eben Alexander as a fraud. He probably reasoned that, at best Alexander's experiences of the "heavenly realms" were just hallucinations brought about by his illness, whenever the doctors reduced his sedatives and he regained a kind of dream-like consciousness. The fact that Alexander did not disclose the real cause of his unconscious state—we can't really call it "coma" because it was readily reversible—just underscores that he is a fraud.

This is a crucial conclusion for Dittrich to make: it exposes Eben Alexander clearly as deceptive and fraudulent or, at best, delusional. An accusation of fraud against an individual is serious and ought to give a journalist some pause. But Dittrich's evidence is clear and incontrovertible. An experienced doctor, who had observed Alexander over several days, declared that Alexander was definitely "conscious but delirious."

And an intermittent delirious state would explain fully Eben Alexander's internal experience, from the "Earthworm Eye View"—under anesthesia—to the Spinning Melody—starting to come out of anesthesia—then to "The Gateway" and beyond—a dream-like state.

A perfect fit. Explaining a fully hallucinatory experience.

Once again, why investigate further? There's no need for corroboration, no need to check with other experts about all the indications that his brain was severely damaged by the bacterial infection. After all, the experts weren't there in the ER and the ICU. And the other doctors who *were* involved with Alexander's case refused to be interviewed. The one doctor who *was* present is certainly sufficient. And the other doctors would undoubtedly corroborate Dr. Potter's assessment.

But what about the overwhelming evidence for severe meningitis? The data all come directly from Alexander. He could easily have exaggerated, embellished or even fabricated them—a very good reason for Alexander to insist that his medical records be kept confidential.

Did Luke Dittrich attempt to corroborate Dr. Potter's assessment with anyone else who was involved? No.

It would have been very easy to ask Holley what the other doctors had been telling her. After all that's supposedly where Eben had gotten the story. But Holley could have colluded with Eben. In any case she was not asked. Holley's friend Sylvia White, who was also present for these consultations, could have been asked, but she, too, was not.

Were Luke Dittrich or his editors at all concerned that the very heart of their portrayal of Eben Alexander as a fraud was based on the sole assessment of one doctor? Apparently not.

Were they concerned that Luke Dittrich might have misheard Dr. Potter or possibly misinterpreted what she had told him? Apparently not.

Dittrich did not recheck with Dr. Potter and did not show her how he was quoting her. Had he done so, he would have gotten a surprise.

Members of the Alexander family circle have told me that Dr. Laura Potter expressed to them concern after she was contacted by the press when the *Esquire* article first appeared, and subsequently expressed her alarm about the way her remarks had been twisted. She felt that Luke Dittrich had misrepresented what she had told him and taken her words out of context. She felt that he had led her to say certain things.

So Luke Dittrich's portrayal of the events regarding Alexander's illness is inaccurate. Dittrich took Dr. Potter's statements out of context, twisted them and misrepresented them.

And what *are* the facts regarding Eben Alexander's coma state? If Luke Dittrich had read *Proof of Heaven* with any care, he would have found a definitive statement of the facts about Alexander's coma in Appendix A, from Alexander's infectious disease specialist Dr. Scott Wade:

Dr. Alexander had become ill quickly with flu-like symptoms, back pain, and a headache. He was promptly transported to the Emergency Room, where he had a CT scan of his head and then a lumbar puncture with spinal fluid suggesting a gram-negative meningitis. He was immediately begun on intravenous antibiotics targeting that and placed on a ventilator machine **because of his critical condition and coma**. ... Despite prompt and aggressive antibiotic treatment for his *E. coli* meningitis as well as continued care in the medical intensive care unit, he **remained in a coma six days** and hope for a quick recovery faded (mortality over 97 percent). (p. 183, emphasis added)

Did Luke Dittrich read this part of *Proof of Heaven*? It's an Appendix that gives the statement of the lead doctor on Eben Alexander's case. Dr. Wade states clearly that Alexander was in a coma in the ER and *remained in a coma for six days*.

So the heart of Luke Dittrich's portrayal of Eben Alexander's condition is a total fabrication, based on a complete misrepresentation of Dr. Potter's statements to him. In light of Dittrich's "inaccurate portrayal," it would be instructive to review the full recording of the interview—assuming that he recorded his interviews with Dr. Potter—to understand the full context where Dittrich asked Potter whether Alexander's manic, agitated state during his first days of coma could be considered conscious and she responded, "Yes, conscious but delirious." Did Luke Dittrich lead Dr. Potter into making certain statements?

In the face of the other doctors' refusal to be interviewed, Luke Dittrich could have confirmed the doctors' assessment of Alexander's case with other witnesses. Had he checked with Sylvia White, she would have told him:

I sat with [Eben's] wife Holley [on Sunday morning] as the doctor showed us the scans and when he told Holley to call her family. He told her that Eben could not survive and that, even if he did, he would be irreparably damaged; in fact, he would be in a vegetative state, one that would require ongoing care at a nursing home. Such observations reflected the ongoing meningitis-induced coma and the dismal neurological prognosis, not recommendations that would be made for a patient simply in a "drug-induced coma."

Luke Dittrich also failed to consult with medical experts who would have told him that the evidence from the medical data that were available indicated coma caused by severe damage to the cortex and brainstem, which would likely result in death.

Luke Dittrich's editors at *Esquire* also failed to insist that Dittrich obtain key confirmations and corroborations in an article that essentially trashed a good man's reputation.

Now we see that all three key flaws in Eben Alexander's story have turned out to be totally false or trivial. And Luke Dittrich is relying especially on this last one to build a case that Alexander's story is a complete fabrication, and his heavenly experience a hallucination or a fantasy.

All it would have taken was a simple conversation with two or three of the people identified in *Proof of Heaven* as witnesses—who were available to be interviewed—to corroborate or definitively refute Alexander's account. In this last case, Dittrich's argument rested solely on the assessment of Dr. Laura Potter. Yet had he asked her, Dr. Potter would have confirmed the accuracy of Alexander's story. Likewise Holley, Michael Sullivan, Phyllis Alexander and Sylvia White would have confirmed the accuracy of the story in *Proof of Heaven*.

Dissecting a coma

Understanding Eben Alexander's story in *Proof of Heaven* requires understanding coma and seizure.

In order to maintain consciousness, a person needs to have a perfectly functioning cerebral cortex and brainstem. Any significant impairment of cortical function—something as trivial as a few good whiffs of ether—can cause loss of consciousness. With further impairment of cortical and brainstem function, the person slips deeper and deeper into coma, a state where the person can't be awakened, fails to respond normally to painful stimuli and doesn't initiate voluntary actions.

The stages of coma can be charted with the [Glasgow Coma Scale](#) which assesses eye, verbal and motor responses. In addition, other neurological examinations, such as the [pupillary light reflex](#), indicate the status of brainstem function. For example, if the pupils do not constrict on shining a light, this would indicate brainstem or similar impairment.

[Seizures](#) of the sort exhibited by Eben Alexander, so called tonic-clonic seizures, are symptoms that present outwardly as wild thrashing movements. During the tonic phase the skeletal muscles will suddenly tense and the person may also express brief vocalizations like a loud moan or scream due to air forcefully expelled from the lungs. During the clonic phase, the person's muscles will start to contract and relax rapidly, causing convulsions. There may be exaggerated twitching of the limbs or violent shaking.

Seizures are caused by abnormal, excessive neuronal firing in the brain. The muscle movements and groaning or screaming are the result of abnormal neural activity in various motor parts of the brain or motor reflex circuits.

Alexander exhibited [status epilepticus](#) or persistent seizures. Early on, Dr. Potter administered 15 milligrams of [diazepam](#) (p. 18) to calm Alexander down and later more sedatives to enable a [lumbar puncture](#) (p. 21). The sedatives calmed the neural activity thereby, and reduced or eliminated the thrashing. It is likely that at some later time, a tonic phase started again with the reflexive verbal outburst of "God, help me!" It's possible that Alexander was briefly in a semi-conscious, confusional state at this point, which would explain the clarity of his utterance, but he has no memory of saying it.

The coma and seizures were brought on by the onslaught of the bacterial meningitis infection which spread very rapidly through his cerebral spinal fluid. The bacteria attacked the entire outer surface of his brain including the neocortex, [hippocampus](#) and other parts of the [limbic system](#), and the [brainstem](#). This attack brought on Alexander's subjective experience of loss of memory, language and identity, and his loss of consciousness. The attack also induced wild neuronal fluctuations in his cortex and other regions which resulted in the persistent seizures. Eben Alexander was in a meningitis-induced coma hours before the sedatives were administered. The sedatives were administered to control the seizures. Alexander remained in a meningitis-induced coma even after the sedating medications were stopped.

Contrary to Luke Dittrich's assertion, Eben Alexander *did* disclose the use of sedatives in a "chemically induced coma":

"At times, early in the week, I would move. My body would thrash around wildly. A nurse would rub my head and **give me more sedation**, and eventually I'd become quiet again... By the end of the week these

occasional bursts of motor activity had all but ceased. **I needed no more sedation**, because movement—even the dead, automatic kind initiated by the most primitive reflex loops of my lower brainstem and spinal cord—had dwindled almost to nil." (p. 92, emphasis added)

One has to wonder how carefully Luke Dittrich read *Proof of Heaven* to be able to say, "There is no indication in the book that it was Laura Potter, and not bacterial meningitis, that induced his coma [pp. 18 & 21], or that the physicians in the ICU maintained his coma in the days that followed through the use of anesthetics [p. 92]."

But Luke Dittrich clearly misunderstood that there were *two simultaneous causes* of Eben Alexander's coma: the main cause was the bacterial meningitis infection; the secondary cause—the sedatives—suppressed the seizure symptoms. When Alexander was thrashing about, his Glasgow Coma Scale was probably scored at 6 or 7, assessed with a somewhat higher motor component. Once the thrashing stopped and the sedatives were withdrawn at the end of the week, it had probably dropped to 3 or 4—deep coma.

Coda: The Dalai Lama pronounces Eben Alexander unreliable and a liar

Luke Dittrich is an excellent writer, producing finely crafted, award-winning journalism. He saved the best pronouncements of Eben Alexander's character and veracity to the end—from the Dalai Lama no less, a person of great spiritual insight who is held in high esteem throughout the world. So important were these pronouncements that the *Esquire* editors emblazoned them in an all-caps [pull quote](#) in the article:

THE DALAI LAMA WAGS A FINGER AT ALEXANDER. WHEN A MAN MAKES EXTRAORDINARY CLAIMS, HE SAYS, A "THOROUGH INVESTIGATION" IS REQUIRED, TO ENSURE THAT PERSON IS "RELIABLE," HAS "NO REASON TO LIE."

The quote might just as well have said:

THE DALAI LAMA INVITES EBEN ALEXANDER TO SPEAK AT HIS COLLEGE'S CONVOCATION IN ORDER TO PRONOUNCE HIM UNRELIABLE AND A LIAR.

Luke Dittrich had laid the case out well against Eben Alexander: an instance of altering medical records to cover his medical error, a failed career as a neurosurgeon, and a story of "heaven" so clearly built on fabrications and embellishments that its very heart and message cannot be trusted.

Dittrich reports that once Eben Alexander realizes in a later interview the tenor of the article Dittrich is writing, Eben is reduced to pleading with Luke: "I just think that you're doing a great disservice to your readers to lead them down a pathway of thinking that any of that is, is relevant. And I just, I really ask, as a friend, don't..."

And Luke Dittrich now produces the coda to his brilliantly constructed piece of journalism, the *coup de grâce* to Eben Alexander's hubris. After all, who could have a greater spiritual insight into a person's character than His Holiness the Dalai Lama?

On May 10, 2013, His Holiness invited two distinguished scholars to speak at a [symposium on "Life and After Life"](#) as part of the Buddhist [Maitripa College](#) convocation in Portland, Oregon. Dr. Alexander spoke briefly about his near-death experience and how his view of past and future lives and the mind's potential were transformed. Dr. José Cabezon, a Buddhist scholar, then spoke about reincarnation from an academic perspective. His Holiness then commented, first on Dr. Cabezon's talk.

Then [at 44:25 in the video] His Holiness turned to address Dr. Alexander. Here Dittrich picks up the story: [45:50] His Holiness explained that phenomena are categorized into "evident phenomena" that can be studied by direct observation, "hidden phenomena" that can be inferred based on observed phenomena, and then the third category is "extremely hidden phenomena" which can be accessed only through our own first-person experience or the first-person testimony of someone else.

[46:54] "Now for example," the Dalai Lama says, "his sort of experience." He points to Alexander. "For him, it's something reality. Real. But those people who never sort of experienced that, still, his mind is a little bit sort of..." He taps his fingers against the side of his head. "Different!" he says...

[47:46] "For that also, we must investigate," the Dalai Lama says. "Through investigation we must get sure that person is truly reliable." He wags a finger in Alexander's direction. **"When a man makes extraordinary claims, a thorough investigation" is required, to ensure "that person reliable, never telling lie," and has "no reason to lie."** (emphasis added)

It's very clear to Luke Dittrich what is being said here: the Dalai Lama has smoked out Eben Alexander and caught him in the lies that are now all too clear in his book. "We must get sure that person is truly reliable, never telling lie, has no reason to lie," the Dalai Lama says.

For Dittrich, another clear open-and-shut case. What more proof does one need than His Holiness the Dalai Lama making such clear pronouncements about lying to the very man who has been caught in so many fabrications?

But is that what the Dalai Lama actually said? Fortunately anyone can review [the video](#) for him or herself. So let's see from the top how His Holiness treated Eben Alexander. The first words he addressed to Alexander were:

[44:25, DL gestures to EA] As for your own, as **your explanation, on the basis of your own sort of experience, quite** sort of, ah, **amazing.** (emphasis added)

Did Luke Dittrich catch that? His Holiness said, your explanation, on the basis of your own experience [is] quite amazing. It's hard to understand the Dalai Lama at this point, but his facial expression and gestures certainly convey the sense of "quite amazing".

His Holiness later proceeds to talk about dealing with "extremely hidden phenomena":

[46:54, DL gestures to EA] Now for example, his own sort of experience: for him it's something real. But those people who never sort of experienced that, still, his mind is a little bit sort of different. It's possible like that. [translator] So when we touch upon the third category of phenomena which is really extremely hidden and obscure, then, for the time being, for the other people -- there's no real access, direct or inferential, so the only method that is left is to really rely on the testimony of the first-person experience of the person himself or herself.

[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 this 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)

Did Luke Dittrich miss the highlighted phrases? Let's compare how Dittrich interprets this part versus what was actually said:

He wags a finger in Alexander's direction. **"When a man makes extraordinary claims, a "thorough investigation" is required, to ensure "that person reliable, never telling lie," and has "no reason to lie."**

His Holiness did not wag his finger at Alexander and he did not say "when a man makes extraordinary claims". No, His Holiness was referring to "extremely obscure phenomena" which do not require "extraordinary proof", as the saying goes, but only a determination that the person is reliable, never telling a lie, with no reason to lie.

Luke Dittrich probably concluded the following: not only has he (Luke) demonstrated that Alexander lied in many places in his account, but Dittrich has also exposed the many reasons Alexander has to lie—financial gain, prestige, the adulation of "guruhood". Therefore in the Dalai Lama's eyes—if His Holiness only knew what Dittrich knows with certainty—Eben Alexander would be judged unreliable and a liar.

But that's Luke Dittrich's conclusion, not the Dalai Lama's. For His Holiness, Eben Alexander has no reason to lie and therefore one can take Alexander's testimony to be credible.

And His Holiness goes on to show his acceptance of the validity of Eben Alexander's experience:

[49:12] [DL] Among the scientists so far as I notice, the later part of the twentieth century, they [created] a sort of knowledge or field, they carried a sort of research about the brain – quite subtly. [49:30, pointing to EA] **At a more deeper level there is still more mysterious things.** (emphasis added)

Did Luke Dittrich miss this one also? Dittrich's summary of the proceedings after "has no reason to lie" was simply, "Then [the Dalai Lama] changes the subject, starts talking about a massive project to translate ancient Tibetan texts." One can see that that's not actually what happened.

But Dittrich's main point had been made—the Dalai Lama did, or clearly *would* if he had the full picture, judge Alexander as the unreliable liar Dittrich has clearly shown him to be.

One has to ask, does it even make sense that the Dalai Lama would invite a person to speak at the convocation of one of his colleges and then turn around and proclaim the man unreliable and a liar? The incongruity of such a picture is mind-boggling.

Did Luke Dittrich realize how far off his interpretation of the Dalai Lama's words were, even when he skipped over the phrase referring to Alexander "and *in this particular case* this is no reason to tell lie", which completely nullifies his interpretation? Probably not.

Did Dittrich's editors check how accurate his transcription and interpretation were? Apparently not.

Did Luke Dittrich or his editors realize how incongruous their interpretation was in light of Alexander's position as an honored guest at the Dalai Lama's symposium—even emblazoning the clearly erroneous implications across the page? Again, apparently not.

What is at stake here is a man's reputation. What Luke Dittrich and his editors did was to take the words of the Dalai Lama and twist and distort their meaning to the opposite of their true meaning, in order to drive home a conclusion—that Eben Alexander is a fraud—a conclusion which we have shown here to be completely unwarranted and erroneous.

Great journalism or journalistic malpractice?

To *Esquire's* Editor in Chief David Granger, Luke Dittrich's story is great journalism.

To me the Dittrich article is shoddy and irresponsible journalism—*shoddy* because of Luke Dittrich's and his *Esquire* editors' evident failures:

failure to consider alternate explanations (rainbow), failure to check with the cited witnesses (Phyllis and Betty Alexander), failure to verify information with additional witnesses (Holley Alexander, Michael Sullivan and others), failure to check with medical experts (on the likely cause of coma), failure to check again on crucial testimony of the sole cited witness (Laura Potter), failure to read the book carefully (Dr. Wade's statement

about Alexander's coma), failure to verify conclusions via other witnesses (Holley Alexander and Sylvia White), failure to exercise care in asserting erroneous facts (use of drugs was not mentioned in the book), failure to exercise care in quoting and interpreting recorded remarks (Dalai Lama), and failure to exercise common sense in interpreting the meaning of statements (Dalai Lama).

And Dittrich's article was *irresponsible* because of the impact—the real harm—the resulting distortions have caused. I am sure Luke Dittrich and his editors felt completely justified, based on what they felt was a solid case against Eben Alexander. They probably also considered the negative effect that Dittrich's article and its conclusions would have on Alexander and others, and similarly felt justified. In their minds, Eben Alexander is a complete fraud and deserves to be exposed as such.

But did Luke Dittrich and his editors exercise *sufficient care* in building their case? In my opinion they did not: the facts presented in the article were distorted or completely wrong and the conclusions are totally unwarranted. And the result has been devastating to those people who know the facts and how utterly wrong they were portrayed in the article. They include all of the people I mentioned two paragraphs above, especially Dr. Laura Potter whose statements were misrepresented and distorted by Luke Dittrich to establish the central fact of his case. Even His Holiness the Dalai Lama would be quite dismayed that his warm, supportive statements to Eben Alexander have been so cleverly distorted into the exact opposite of his meaning.

But the person most harmed is Dr. Eben Alexander, whose reputation has been severely damaged on the basis of Dittrich's erroneous, distorted judgments. From now on, many people will associate Eben Alexander with altering records, embellishment, fabrication and delusion. Eben Alexander's response seems all the more relevant now that the facts are a little clearer:

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.** (emphasis added)

And what of the other allegations insinuated or leveled at Eben Alexander? He deserves to have his side of these cases heard as well. Dr. Alexander's 25-year neurosurgical career included over 4,000 surgeries. Luke Dittrich does not have a good track record with the truth with respect to Eben Alexander: one cannot trust his portrayal of the facts.

The most serious of the cases Dittrich cites, that Dr. Alexander altered medical records in a case of wrong-level spine surgery, similarly distorts the truth, according to Dr. Alexander. The patient in question had excellent relief of his symptoms after Dr. Alexander's surgery, delaying Alexander's discovery that surgery had been performed at an unintended level. Dr. Alexander corrected the record to reflect the newly learned facts of the case, and disclosed the surgical error to all parties after follow up revealed a genuine surgical benefit. After full investigation by three state medical boards and the American Board of Neurological Surgeons, Dr. Alexander continued to practice medicine without restriction, with his board certification intact.

From his investigative work, Luke Dittrich knows something about malpractice. In professions like medical and legal practice, [malpractice](#) involves negligence or incompetence on the part of a professional. This would entail the failure to exercise the degree of skill, prudence and diligence ordinarily expected of a member of the profession. Malpractice is not ordinarily used for journalistic practice. However, there are certain informal ethics and standards of behavior that apply, particularly within a given publishing organization.

The content of Luke Dittrich's article certainly raises the question as to what standards were applied to it by *Esquire*. In my opinion, Mr. Dittrich's actions in investigating and writing the article and *Esquire's* unabashed endorsement of it rise to the level of malpractice.

A genuine near-death experience

So was Eben Alexander's experience a "genuine" near-death experience? Definitely yes!

A near-death experience (NDE) is a profound psychological event a person has close to death or in a situation of physical or psychological crisis. Because it includes transcendent or mystical elements, an NDE is a powerful event of consciousness, resulting in profound, lasting aftereffects.

Every near-death experience is unique but there are a number of common elements. Most NDEs have some subset of these elements: a feeling of peace and the absence of pain, a feeling of being separated from the physical body, a transition to a higher level (sometimes through a tunnel), being in a heavenly place of overwhelming beauty, meeting deceased loved ones, being in the presence of a Being of Light or some other spiritual being, having a life review, being transported to a place of pure Love and Wisdom, reaching a barrier or being told you must go back, and finally returning to the physical body.

Readers who are familiar with Eben Alexander's inner experience will recognize that he experienced a number of these elements, for example, a transition to a higher place, being in a heavenly place, meeting a deceased loved one, being transported to a place of pure Love and Wisdom, being in the presence of a high spiritual being, and being told that he must go back.

Alexander's NDE would score very high on the [Greyson NDE Scale](#). This scale is based on 16 NDE elements and their intensity, scored 0, 1 or 2. A total score of 7 or greater is considered to indicate a genuine NDE. Eben Alexander's experience was a genuine NDE.

One aspect of Alexander's experience that is not very common in NDEs is his loss of all memory, language and identity. As mentioned earlier, I believe this was the result of the initial simultaneous bacterial attack on specific areas of his brain—the hippocampus, [Wernicke's language comprehension region](#) and the frontal lobes.

The initial stage of Alexander's experience, the "Earthworm Eye View," is very uncommon. Alexander describes it as dark and blurry, like being submerged in a kind of transparent mud, with deep rhythmic pounding, a disgusting feces-like smell and root-like structures around him. Grotesque faces would bubble up, screech and then disappear. In his talks after his book was published, Alexander has stated that he believes this level of consciousness was actually brain-based, "all that my feeble cortex could muster at the time."

Indeed, I would concur that the bacterial attack had probably not yet reached all areas of his cortex at this point, in particular the sulci or inward folds of the cortex. Still he was in a coma (can't be awakened, fails to respond normally to painful stimuli and doesn't initiate voluntary actions) with no memory, language or sense of identity. His brain's minimal, intermittent electrical activity produced a minimal consciousness—a dull inward vision and rudimentary hearing and smell.

Then a white-gold rotating light appeared, accompanied by a rich, complex, "living" melody—the Spinning Melody. The light approached and revealed an opening—very much like others have seen a tunnel. Alexander experienced a very quick movement upward through the opening and found himself in a beautiful hyper-real scene—brilliant, vibrant, stunning—The Gateway. This part of Alexander's experience is very much like those of many other NDErs, a very real, heaven-like region—a verdant valley, exquisite flowering trees and bushes—and other people below. There was a divine, warm comforting breeze blowing through the valley.

He was floating on the wing of a butterfly and beside him sat a beautiful young woman. Eben Alexander is very explicit with what she looked like—deep blue eyes, high cheek bones and long golden-brown hair. She looked at him with a deep love and told him telepathically that he was deeply loved forever. She told him he would learn many things but eventually would have to go back. Again these aspects of Alexander's experience are very typical, including the message that he would need to go back.

Above him in The Gateway were puffy, pink-white clouds and transparent orbs of shimmering beings, perhaps angels, singing in a glorious, palpable chant. When he had an inward question—where is this place? who am I?—the answers streamed into him from this chorus. The thoughts entered into him directly without words.

When NDErs begin to recount their experience of the light-filled world that they visited, you can tell that they are re-living the experience in the telling. They are re-experiencing the feelings of joy and love and the sense of "returning home" that they had in their NDE. They frequently say that in the retelling, they have been able to "return to the Light," if only briefly. Again, Eben Alexander shows this in his voice and demeanor when he retells his story.

Finally Alexander entered an immense infinite void, completely dark but also brimming with a light from a brilliant Orb. He was now at The Core. The Orb was his companion but within The Core, permeating throughout it, was the Source, God the Creator. Through the Orb, God disclosed many secrets and mysteries of existence to Eben, knowledge that he received instantly and directly and stored without memorization—knowledge that will take him a lifetime to process. Again, this experience of the Infinite Void, of being in the presence of God and of receiving all knowledge and wisdom, is very typical of the "deeper" NDEs although they are only a small percentage of the total.

The vast majority of NDErs comment on the hyper-real quality of their experience, saying it was "more real than real" and "The *other* realm is reality; this *physical* realm is the dream and illusion." They also frequently note that their memory of their NDE is very vivid and does not fade, even after many years. Eben Alexander's NDE has both of these features.

Alexander was then pulled back into the Earthworm Eye View. But now he had gained knowledge. And he found that if he thought of the Spinning Melody, he would be able to return to The Gateway Realm and then back to The Core. Each time though, inevitably he would be sent back. He took this round-trip journey several times. Again, this is not at all uncommon for NDErs who have their experience while in coma over long periods of time. They find themselves out of their body in their NDE and then returning back to their physical body many times, but always remaining in coma, unable to move or communicate with the "outside" world.

A corroborating time anchor

Eventually Eben Alexander found that the Spinning Melody would no longer take him back to The Gateway. Alexander sank back through walls of clouds and noticed a murmuring around him—a great throng of beings, people, who were praying for him. He later recognized two of the faces, Michael Sullivan and his wife Page, both of whom had been praying for him. Page had not been physically present in the hospital.

Toward the very end of his ordeal, he had descended back to the Earthworm Eye View realm but now the faces that appeared were those he later remembered clearly. On looking back on it, he realized that these were the faces of Sylvia, Holley and her sister Peggy, Dr. Scott Wade and another close friend of Holley's, Susan Reintjes—five faces he recognized and a sixth that appeared later, that of his son Bond.

It happened that earlier Sylvia had contacted Susan Reintjes at her home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Susan is an intuitive, author of [Third Eye Open](#), who regularly helps coma patients to heal by contacting them psychically. Sylvia summarized Eben's condition to Susan. Susan later reached out to Eben in a meditative state, "descending" to a

very deep level, until she was sure she had reached him. Susan told Eben he was not ready to leave his body yet; his body would know what to do to come back.

Why had Eben Alexander seen these specific six faces? They had all been praying for him the last night or the final morning of his coma. Of these, Susan Reintjes had not been physically present, having prayed and meditated from Chapel Hill, 120 miles from Lynchburg.

The sixth face—that of his son Bond—was particularly compelling. Eben felt that this was the face of someone—he didn't recognize who—who needed him, someone who would never recover if Eben left. If Eben abandoned this person, the loss would be unbearable, a betrayal Eben simply couldn't commit. In fact, that Sunday morning, Bond was pleading—desperately—for his dad to come back.

And Eben Alexander opened his eyes and began to look around.

This feature of Alexander's NDE—the faces that were later recognized—would be called a veridical time anchor, an event or series of events that establishes a correlation between elements perceived in the NDE and events that occurred in the earthly realm. Here we have a series of faces later recognized by Eben and recognized as praying for him, perceived in the time sequence they occurred in the earthly realm, particularly on the last night and final morning. It is all the more interesting that Susan Reintjes, and also Page Sullivan, had not been physically present in the hospital. The correlation is further strengthened in that the last face, the last person, was felt to be particularly emotionally compelling to Eben and was in fact the last person to be so emotionally involved in pleading for Eben's return.

It is very common—indeed a textbook case—for a mother or father to be drawn back to physical life from their NDE, out of the love and commitment they feel for a child. The strength of that feeling may be something they had not realized before. These cases suggest—as does Eben Alexander's—that there is a bond of love that exists between a mother or father and their children that is deeper and stronger than could have developed from their lives shared together on earth.

The details of this "time anchor" should be studied further to verify it and because there are likely other interesting correlations present. At this time, the correlations of the time anchor—particularly the recognition of people who were not physically present—strongly suggest that Eben Alexander's experience could not have been constructed in the moments after recovering consciousness, as some skeptics have suggested.

A "Peak in Darien" experience with a further confirmation

Some NDEs include visions of deceased people who are not known to the person or who are not known at the time to be dead. These are called "Peak in Darien" experiences.

Eben Alexander was puzzled by who the beautiful young woman was who accompanied him on the butterfly wing in The Gateway Realm. He didn't recognize her, yet he remembered her features and what she wore perfectly. He frequently would describe her to Holley and their friends to the point that they all could almost see her in their mind's eye.

Eben Alexander had been given up for adoption when four months old. Only a year before his illness, he was finally reunited with his birth parents, who had later married after his adoption and had had other children. Their reunion was tinged with sadness because the youngest daughter Betsy—Eben's biological sister—had died nine years earlier.

Eben did not receive Betsy's photograph until four months after his coma, when his recovery was nearly complete. In the photograph, Betsy had long brown hair, deep blue eyes and a smile that radiated love and kindness. She

looked strangely, hauntingly familiar. The next morning, Eben was reading an NDE account in one of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' books of a young girl's NDE. The girl confided in her father that she had met her brother in the NDE, only she didn't have a brother. Tearfully the father told her that she did indeed have a brother who had died just three months before she was born, and they had never told her about him.

Eben Alexander then realized that, while the photograph of Betsy did not show the heavenly light of The Gateway around her and didn't show the beautiful powder blue and indigo dress he had seen her wearing on the butterfly wing, Betsy was indeed the young woman who had accompanied him on the butterfly wing in The Gateway Realm. There was no mistaking her.

And others recognized Betsy as the beautiful young woman whom Eben had met in his NDE—on the basis of Eben's earlier descriptions. Sylvia White recently wrote about and then elaborated on her experience:

One of the most convincing aspects of Eben's account is his description of the young woman who accompanied him. He described her to me and his wife Holley in minute detail, down to her golden streaked hair, blue eyes, and dress. When I saw Betsy's photo, which rests on his bureau, I was stunned to realize that Betsy was the woman who had been described to us, right down to her high cheekbones.

Shortly after [Eben's] recovery, I visited Lynchburg. Holley took me into the bedroom and said, "You won't believe this." She showed me the framed photo of Betsy and told me that she was [Eben's] deceased sister. I immediately recognized her as the woman he had described to us, especially her hair, eyes, and smile. It seemed to me at the time that it was just not possible for a woman, who was that alive and loving as she grinned into the camera, to be dead. Everything about her convinced me that she was indeed the spirit guide for him during his coma and spiritual experience.

Peak in Darien experiences in NDEs are fairly rare but they are striking and moving revelations to all who hear them. Eben Alexander's experience has the additional confirmation that his own descriptions of the beautiful young woman were so vivid that they could be confirmed by those who similarly had never met Betsy. His descriptions before the photograph arrived also negate the objections some have proposed that Alexander had [conflated](#) the photograph and his recollections of a young woman, or that his memory was merely a vague [déjà vu](#).

Conclusion

So Eben Alexander's *Proof of Heaven* turns out to be quite the opposite of what Luke Dittrich portrayed or implied—namely, a story concocted out of the hallucinations of a sick brain coming periodically out of sedation and embellished with fanciful stories of rainbows and dramatic shouts for help. Rather, *Proof of Heaven* turns out to be an honestly portrayed true story of a dangerously close brush with death, a genuine near-death experience of love, healing and heavenly revelation, and a miraculous physical healing. *Proof of Heaven* is, most importantly, a story of love—of a love that could reach across dimensions to unite a sister and brother who had never met, and of the bond of love between a father and son that brought Eben Alexander back from death's door.

Revised: August 21, 2013 – minor changes that clarified context

Revised: August 15, 2013 – removed direct quote from Dr. Potter per her request, clarified context

Revised: August 14, 2013 – reorganized sections, no significant content change

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Robert and Suzanne Mays are [near-death experience researchers](#). Robert also serves as Treasurer on the Board of Directors of the [International Association for Near-Death Studies](#) (IANDS). IANDS is holding its [2013 Conference in Arlington, Virginia](#), August 29 - September 1. Dr. Eben Alexander will be one of the conference's keynote speakers as well as a participant on a panel of physicians who have had an NDE. Robert has a strong interest in IANDS' success and in Dr. Alexander's success as an NDEr, a member of IANDS and an individual. Robert and Suzanne also have an interest in exposing and ameliorating injustices that occur from time to time among human beings.