

BOOK REVIEW

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Experiences Near Death: Beyond Medicine and Religion, by Allan Kellehear. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996, 230 pp., \$25.00 hb.

Allan Kellehear is an Australian with a Ph.D. in sociology and numerous publications to his credit. In this book he attempts to examine the near-death experience (NDE) from a sociological perspective. If you are looking for a book reporting new NDEs, or a book that documents the validity and reliability of the near-death experience, this is not the book for you. But if you are looking for a new approach to studying the implications of the near-death experience for the individual and society, then you would find this book informative. Although it has some limitations, I would recommend this book because of its unique approach.

As he noted in the preface to *Experiences Near Death*, it is Kellehear's intention not to get caught up in a medical versus religious debate as to the validity or origins of the experience:

We do not see or think in totally neutral ways. Our ways of understanding are colored by an assortment of hopes and troubles, both private and public. Thus, the central question I am posing in this book is: what does the NDE, and the community and academic reactions to it, look like in various contexts? This question enables us to go beyond the popular medical and religious images of the NDE, to challenge their relevance and, at times, even their validity.

I have attempted to break away from the polarized and restricted parameters of religious or medical debate, a debate no one seems capable of winning, to address these social and cultural meanings of the NDE. (pp. vii–viii)

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Kellehear assumes that people in general know what a sociologist is. As a practicing sociologist of many years, I can attest that this assumption is incorrect, at least in the United States. In chatting with people with all levels of education, and from many social classes and religious backgrounds, I have discovered that misperceptions about sociologists and what they are and do are legion. Sociologists are most likely to be confused with social workers, clinical psychologists, counselors, socialists, welfare workers, and even personnel managers.

To confuse the issue further, there are radically divergent perspectives even within the field of sociology and between sociologists. It would therefore have been very helpful to the reader had Kellehear begun this book by informing the reader how sociologists view the world in general and then gone on to describe his specific approach to the study of human behaviors, that is, his sociological orientation. It was not until Chapter 3 that he specified that his research strategy is phenomenological, although many sociologists would classify him as a symbolic interactionist, which is a sociologist who studies the meaning of experiences from the standpoint of the experiencer. And it is not until the appendix that Kellehear explains what a sociologist is and does. Placing that information at the beginning of his book would have made it easier for nonsociologist readers to put into perspective what Kellehear is doing and why it makes sense to approach the NDE in the manner he does.

Kellehear starts his examination of near-death experiences by identifying and studying the popular images of the classical western NDE. He concludes his brief analysis by noting that these images have three features in common:

1. Most observers treat the NDE as a single well-defined entity.
2. They all assume that there are only two ways to understand the NDE: religious—in terms of life after death; or medical—in terms of the dynamics and mechanics of the brain and/or the unconscious.
3. Most ignore the *social* dimensions of the NDE, its popular attraction, and its academic explanations. Rarely considered is the fact that features of the NDE, as well as its popular appeal and its explanations, are dependent on social and political contexts. (pp. 4–5)

To facilitate his analysis, Kellehear identifies the main features of the Western NDE as outlined by Raymond Moody in his classic book *Life*

After Life (1975) and by other researchers, but he limits his subsequent analysis to only two features, passing through a dark tunnel and experiencing a life review. He uses these two attributes to compare and contrast NDEs across cultures. The specific cultures he analyzes included China, India, Guam, Western New Britain, Native America, Aboriginal Australia, and the Maoris of New Zealand. The vast majority of the data he uses are published materials, which greatly limits the conclusions he can draw. Nevertheless I was looking forward to how these radically different cultures were reflected in their NDEs. But his analysis was very abbreviated and limited to a search for the two core elements. What he discovered was that while there were commonalities between some cultures, major differences did occur, particularly in reference to the lack of the tunnel experience and the life review in non-Western societies/cultures. He does acknowledge that his analysis is tentative and that the cases were collected by different researchers using very different methods, and that the data are sensitive to different aspects of the NDE in radically different societies. In addition, Kellehear acknowledges: "Language translation is also a problem. Not all words or phrases have an English equivalent. Indeed, not all social experiences are translatable, particularly out of their contexts" (p. 39).

Kellehear suggests that using social settings to place NDEs into a social context would be very illuminating. The conceptual context he feels could be most useful would be that of crisis:

I suggest that the key to understanding the NDE is to examine this experience in its social and environmental contexts. NDEs are crises, much like the experience of bereavement or of being lost in the desert or at sea. When we see the NDE as a crisis, we start to see the psychological and social effects of strange circumstances. We begin to see and appreciate what our usual responses are to a major disruption of our taken-for-granted world and its meanings. When certainty deserts us, we do not always find ourselves alone and adrift. (p. 20)

He then suggests that looking at NDEs as crises allows us to see them "as merely one type of crisis experience that displays a wide range of individual and social features" (p. 21); to identify the "particular features of a crisis [that] allow one person to reconstruct and transform his or her life while another person is overcome and destroyed by it" (p. 21); and "to recognize that death has no monopoly on personal change, insight, wisdom, or the paranormal, however we may define each of these" (p. 21).

In Chapter 3, Kellehear attempts to demonstrate that it is the perceived social circumstances that play the crucial role in creating the experience:

I am principally concerned with the sense and meaning that the experiencer constructs from the experience rather than its possible causes. This pursuit of social meaning will necessitate locating the NDE within a context of other social experiences of a similar type. There are two reasons for doing this. First, I acknowledge the sociological axiom that the private meanings of individuals are best understood when placed in a cultural context. Second, and flowing from the first point, NDEs should be seen as a member of a group of social phenomena because they have similar consequences for the experiencers and their social networks. (p. 43)

To facilitate his analysis he uses the idea of status passages. That is, people occupy numerous positions at home, at work, and in other situations; and all of these positions are temporary. As individuals grow and gain new experiences, they leave one position for another: home for school, school for employment, and so on. Using the ideas of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1965, 1968, 1971), who wrote several books on death and dying, he argues that dying is a status passage, one that is usually unanticipated and one in which the social behaviors associated with the dying process are usually unprescribed, undesirable, and involuntary. He then goes on to show how the NDE fits these criteria.

In Chapter 4, Kellehear shows that being shipwrecked on a desert island and having an NDE both fit the criteria of a status passage:

Seen as status passage, near-death experiences become social experiences at the peripheries of society which are responsible for some kinds of identity transformation. Status passage as a sociological theory demedicalizes the near-death experience by emphasizing the importance of social context and comparative social analysis. Furthermore, this connecting of clinical NDE with other social NDEs, and the linking of context with reaction, allows us to see how the social shapes the psychological experience of the dying. These are the kinds of ways status passage contributes to our ongoing analysis of the NDE. (p. 55)

Also in Chapter 4, Kellehear looks at how those in small communities and in larger societal settings have given overwhelming acceptance of and support for the NDE.

In Chapter 5, he looks at why the NDE has become such a popular phenomena among many people in contemporary Western societies. He

suggests several trends that seem to be associated with a shift away from scientific explanations:

...the changing experience of death due to rising life expectancy; advances in resuscitation techniques; the impersonal nature of modern death; the growing interest in matters concerning death; changing attitudes toward former social taboos; dissatisfaction with traditional religions; growing skepticism toward institutional authority; and the consequently rising interest in personal testimony and experience. (pp. 98–99)

In Chapter 6, Kellehear examines the NDE in a number of social/cultural contexts to discover what they reveal about their conception of what constitutes the utopian or ideal society. While NDEs differ in some respects from experiencer to experiencer as to what they saw or experienced, those aspects of the NDE that were found to be universally attractive to a vast array of individuals from widely divergent societies were “order, cooperation, kindness, and learning” (p. 114).

Kellehear discusses the “rhetoric of neuroscience” in Chapter 7. He attempts to demonstrate that the claim of value-free neutrality in medical and scientific research is not always adhered to, especially when NDEs become the research focus. He uses quotes from various scientists to document a lack of neutrality, in which words such as “logical,” “illusion,” “rationality,” “credibility,” “dysfunction,” and “abnormal states” typify a mindset that is clearly established prior to examining any data relating to NDEs. Kellehear concludes that the NDE has become a foil in the struggle between science and religion. Science defines the NDE as religious in nature and hence at odds with science. Religious ideas are seen as trivial explanations and holding little or no credence. Nevertheless, most scientific theorists and researchers demonstrate “a strange preoccupation with [religious ideas and practices]—a preoccupation that has a long tradition” (p. 133).

Kellehear then summarizes why the NDE is increasingly accepted by members of the general public. As to death and dying, physicians and medical researchers restrict their efforts to understanding what happens to the body as it dies. But their focus is limited to the chemical and physiological processes, which do not help the dying or their families:

... if neuroscience wishes to enter the *philosophic* domain, to claim that NDEs—or smiles or dreams—are *nothing but* physical mechanisms, it will need better and more credible equipment for its purposes than mere physics, chemistry, and rhetoric. (p. 139)

In Chapter 8, Kellehear uses a sociological analysis of the children's story, *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Williams, 1922), to look at the symbolic meaning of death and the NDE. He concludes his analysis by citing a quote from the work of Carol Zaleski (1987, p. 191):

“When one judges a symbol, one cannot say whether it is true or false, but only whether it is vital or weak,” and this depends on its “capacity to evoke a sense of relationship.” Few of the millions of readers who have read or heard *The Velveteen Rabbit* since its appearance in 1922 accept the literal meaning of Rabbitland. But even fewer would argue against the social message of the story. Those of us who do not believe that love can triumph over loss wish nevertheless that it could. And that very desire to look again at the universal mystery of love and death continues to breathe new life into the story of *The Velveteen Rabbit* and to ensure that our relationship to tales of rebirth, of transcendence of death, remains vital and relevant. (p. 154)

Chapter 9 presents Kellehear's case for the viewing the NDE as a subcategory of crisis. He restates his objective, that it is his intention not to enter into the debate between science and religion (although it appears to me that he did so in Chapter 7, “The Rhetoric of Neuroscience”). His intent in writing this book is to put the NDE into its social context, to examine the NDE's implications for the individual and society and the meanings that have evolved from it. As meanings evolve, they have implications for individuals through actions, and explanations for critical events. Kellehear derives six postulates, although he does not name them as such:

1. “NDEs can be seen as unusual experiences in unusually stressful circumstances. NDEs are not simply medical phenomena” (p. 155).
2. “For NDEers, the experience is one of a number of personal crises that most, if not all of us, may endure during our lives” (p. 156).
3. “Each fragment of the familiar has a kernel of the unfamiliar that gives all situations a slight tension. But for nearly all of us at some stage of our lives, this fiction of the predictable sooner or later unravels because life is invariably greater and more unpredictable than our best-designed plans and responses” (p. 157).
4. “A crisis has been described as a transitional period in life, a turning point in values or attitudes when confronted by an ‘unfamiliar obstacle in life's path’” (p. 157).
5. “The concept of crisis then, described in this way, must be assumed to be neither an abnormal psychological or social situation. This is because it *does* occur regularly, despite being conceived and rationalized as uncommon by our daily habits of thought and

practice. Crises are a usual part of life, however unwelcome that thought may be. In this way, NDEs are important to examine not simply because of their death imagery, but also because they are yet another crisis that disrupts our lives despite our best efforts to avoid them” (pp. 157–8).

6. “Crises are of interest both psychologically and sociologically because they represent *stressors* for the individual and society” (p. 158).

Kellehear then summarizes how people in crisis may experience their lives (phrasing and spacing his):

Unusual physical or social experiences can provide a deep, disturbing or disorienting sense of
Social separation. This can be viewed as the obstacle to overcome, a problem associated with a
Perceived danger to the self or the self-concept and hence
A sense of helplessness and uncertainty of survival. This might prompt
A tendency to review of one’s life and
Unusual perceptual experiences. This can lead to
major personal reorganization or breakdown. (p. 158)

Kellehear examines the preceding features of the NDE to show their applicability and then ties in the clinical NDE with other types of crisis type experiences and how and why they transform the experienter:

Crises show us all, at some time, the need to review our taken-for-granted meanings about the world—about work, relationships, health, money, certainty and uncertainty. They prompt us, usually with considerable force, to change those meanings so that they can provide greater, perhaps truer, understanding. (p. 164)

I found Kellehear’s attempt to initialize sociological concepts and theoretical constructs both innovative and instructive. Rather than get caught up in a fruitless debate as to why NDEs occurred, his approach lets us stand back and view the NDE in its social context. For this factor alone, it is a book that needs not only to be read, but to be studied. In spite of my enthusiasm for his book, however, it has some problem areas.

Let me list seven items that I believe Kellehear either ignored or minimized in order to make his point. First, based on the hundreds of people I have interviewed, the more than 500 books relating to near-death experiences, and thousands of articles, diaries, and journals I have read, I do not find the clinical NDE he uses in his analysis to be

typical of Western or any other NDE. The majority of people who have NDEs report neither passing through a tunnel nor having a life review. I have heard of only a few children going through a tunnel or anything even resembling the equivalent of a tunnel, and only two who had a life review. So his "clinical NDE" appears to be a straw man that does not fit any cultural group.

Second, most NDEs are not the result of crisis or viewed by the experiencer as a crisis. This is especially true of children, although those NDEs that were the result of a child being brutalized in some way come the closest to being what could be considered a crisis. NDEs associated with sudden deaths, deaths sought by the elderly and terminally ill, and deaths resulting from attempts to save someone, do not seem to fit the crisis mold. One could, of course, argue that death or experiencing near-death, by definition, results in crisis; or that if a sudden and unexpected major change occurs in the individual, then the individual must have come close to death and hence a crisis must have occurred.

Third, major transformations do tend to accompany close encounters with death. But major death-related transformations can occur without the individual personally experiencing near-death.

Fourth, some transformations are so profound that serious relationship problems arise. Adjustments are difficult, self perceptions are altered, and the experience so traumatic and dramatic that the person no longer sees him- or herself or the world the same. This would seem to fit the crisis model; but unlike floods, earthquakes, and other natural disasters, which are negative, for many NDErs the experience itself is positive.

Fifth, I believe that the NDE is a much broader phenomenon than "crisis." To restrict the NDE to an analysis of the psychological, cultural, or even physical effects is to miss the entire meaning of the experience. Listening to the meaning of the experience *to the experiencer* reveals a totally different dimension than our four-dimensional universe. To them it is more real than our physical universe with different laws governing time, space, and actions, a universe characterized by love. Kellehear hinted at this in Chapter 6, "In Pursuit of the Ideal Society," but I would have liked to see him develop it more completely.

Sixth, in his attempt to document that those in the physical and medical sciences violate, often in subtle ways, the canons of objectivity in assessing NDEs, Kellehear implies that he (and by extension sociologists in general) rise above such problems. I can testify personally that sociologists are far from being value-free and totally objective in their research. There is a general truism that

there is no such thing as an unbiased conclusion. Inevitably, the cultural background, religious beliefs (including those of agnostics and atheists), experiences, education, and societal conditions impact on our perceptions and conclusions. In his efforts to make his point, Kellehear comes across as being a bit dogmatic, as when he chides those who engage in the religion-versus-science controversy with the observation, "Why, then, except for reasons of ideological bigotry, should anyone continue on in this direction?" (p. 173).

Finally, rather than limiting crosscultural comparisons to the tunnel and the life review, I wish Kellehear had created a composite of what those in divergent cultures report; shown the commonalties between the cultures and, where they exist, the differences; and then discussed how these differences reflect cultural meanings and perspectives. For example, I would have liked to have read Kellehear's perspective on how the Being of Light is identified in different cultures; who it is that meets experiencers at the moment of death; where they are taken; whether they are escorted and by whom; whether people of different cultures have both positive and negative NDEs; what the appearance of the afterlife is like; for those who did have some sort of a life review, are they the same across cultures?; why experiencers come back; whether individuals from different cultures are impacted or transformed in the same ways by their NDEs; and how NDEs are accepted across all societies.

Kellehear's examination of scientific, academic, and religious attempts to explain the NDE is interesting and informative. However, in places he seems to fall prey to the various faults he sees in the major players. Kellehear devotes three times as much space to the problems associated with the scientific and medical explanations than he did to religious explanations. Perhaps he felt that the current prestige accorded medicine and science necessitated such attention.

Kellehear concludes his book with the exhortation "Let us not forget that academic narratives (theories) are intellectual stories that attempt to bring seemingly *disparate* elements of experiences *together*" (p. 172) and the observation:

Not for nothing, then, is it more meaningful to return to the NDE as we know it and ask, as C. Wright Mills asked in a similar fashion some thirty-five years ago: how can the personal crises of ordinary people be linked to their cultural traditions and biographical circumstances, and explained in terms of their intersections within psyche and organism? For the NDE as personal experience and as scholarly study, this is the only question with a genuine future. (p. 173)

In conclusion, *Experiencing Near Death* is a unique and novel approach to the study of the near death experience. It is the only book I am aware of that attempts to look at NDEs as part of a larger cultural experience. I think that Kellehear would agree that this book is a preliminary exploration, and that subsequent efforts need considerable refinement before the use of crisis as a theoretical construct in the study of NDEs could become in any way definitive.

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