LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Researching Sounds in Near-Death Experiences

To the Editor:

Sounds are an important part of the near-death experience (NDE), but someone attempting to measure the incidence of various sounds in NDE reports runs into difficulties. I wonder if researchers can formulate a methodology capable of overcoming these difficulties. I have encountered four major stumbling blocks, as follows:

1. Classifying sounds is difficult. Even broad categories of sounds can defy definition. Take, for example, just four categories: human utterances (speech, weeping, singing), human-made sounds (musical instruments, motors, machines), natural sounds, and animal/insect sounds. Singing is a human utterance, but if an NDEr heard instruments with the music, does the experience need to be classified as human-made sounds as well? Some NDE reports include flowers broadcasting musical notes. How does a researcher categorize that phenomenon?
2. Sounds may be veridical or otherworldly. Does a researcher need to specify the source? A person having an out-of-body experience may report the sound of the siren from the ambulance but may also report celestial-sounding music. One can be verified on the material plane, and the other cannot. Does that matter?
3. The definition of sound as a physical phenomenon may not apply. On earth, sound is defined as pressure variations in a medium, such as vibration in air or water. Many NDE reports include observing the earth from outer space and "hearing" voices from beings of light. Similarly, much of the communication is by way of telepathy; it may be perceived as sound, yet it is often described as being closer to a direct transfer of thought rather than sound vibration.
4. Active versus passive sound reports may differ. Imagine coming out of the supermarket and someone asks you what you experienced inside. You might describe what's on sale and what you saw walking down the produce aisle. If you were asked whether

or not you heard music while shopping, you might respond with, "Well, now that you mention it, yes, I did hear music." That difference in passive versus active reporting will have an impact on the incidence of reported music. The same occurs with NDE reports.

I suppose some of these problems might be overcome with a simple, unqualified content analysis of the incidence of words in the NDE report, but I suspect that in such a process, much of the real meaning of the experience would be lost. If a researcher simply records how often music is reported, for example, when some reports refer to a car radio and others refer to a choir of angels, then the researcher is not really describing the NDE with the level of validity it deserves.

I welcome comments from readers.

Respectfully,
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