

To the Editor:

Since the early days of near-death studies, attempts to uncover the meaning and implications of near-death experiences (NDEs) have had a markedly individualistic bias. Researchers have focused on the subjective content of the NDE, its personal transforming effects, and, in some cases, its status as evidence for individual survival of death. Underlying these studies one can often detect an atomistic and essentialist model of what it means to be a self. Because we are so pervasively influenced by this model, we are predisposed not to notice the social character of near-death reports.

Allan Kellehear's "Near-Death Experiences and the Pursuit of the Ideal Society" (1991) offered a welcome corrective to our individualistic bias. At first it might seem strange to think of NDEs as having a social or political dimension. Compared to the utopian visions of Emanuel Swedenborg, or of the 19th- and early 20th-century spiritualists, contemporary accounts of NDEs would seem to have little to tell us about social organization. After reading Allan Kellehear's article, however, I was persuaded that near-death reports do offer a vision of an ideal society, and that a sociologist's perspective can deepen our appreciation of the ultimate meaning of the NDE.

Kellehear introduced us to an illuminating typology of ideal societies: the sensualist's land of cockayne, the romantic's arcadia, the puritan's moral commonwealth, the apocalypticist's millennial kingdom, and the reformer's utopia. Each of these models has something to teach us about our own fundamental values, values that are imbedded both in near-death visions and in near-death research.

Is the ideal society a place of work, idle pleasure, or contemplative beatitude? Is it a society based on law, or on spontaneous fulfillment of human nature? Is it an egalitarian society, or a highly stratified one? Does it center on family life, or does it transcend the structures of marriage and family? By comparing near-death reports to traditional models of the ideal society, Kellehear has put these questions into sharp relief.

I readily concede that, like other investigators, I have underestimated the social relevance of the NDE, and I thank Kellehear for bringing this to our attention in a manner that was mercifully free of the naive reductionism that often accompanies sociological interpretations of religious and visionary experience. Without seeking to deprive individual NDErs of their right to believe in their own experiences, Kellehear has provided a promising new vantage point from which to appreciate the many ways in which NDEs can be meaningful.

References

- Kellehear, A. (1991). Near-death experiences and the pursuit of the ideal society. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 10, 79-95.

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