

To the Editor:

Allan Kellehear (1991) has asked whether social images of a transcendent ideal society, as defined by near-death experience (NDE) accounts, might prompt or inspire changes in social values. If they do, Kellehear explained, it would be important to know why. He called NDE accounts the most current chapter in a lengthy search for social ideas about living harmoniously. Has Kellehear opened up a critical chapter in a continuing search for what makes societies operate?

I read his article not with delight in another chance to argue the probability of truth or untruth in these queer tales, but with concern

that these stories tell us more than we admit to hearing. Even though his article did not explain how or why NDErs end up on their journeys, I nevertheless found myself understanding how changing societies first inspire and then require from their participants the reevaluation and redefinition of individual and social images. I saw that NDErs explore and reevaluate social and personal identity in order to prompt new images that represent new identities. When societies change, identities change, and so do the individual and social images.

In my anthropological fieldwork I come upon "traditional knowledge" or folklore that acts upon a social group and assists them with change. My favorite example is a legendary and historical account of the origin of a group of Central Americans. This particular legend belongs in the repertoire of a native Mesoamerican people who used it to recount their creation and simultaneously teach themselves individual and social change. Both lessons were incorporated into a legend about dying.

In the story, they came from death at some undetermined date, and said they were going to their "new" death; so that the 16th-century written version of this oral narrative established where the people were going by telling where they had come. Spelling out their "roots," these native Americans explained a footing, so to speak, laid down during the execution and death of a captured child. Led by their "First Ancestor," the warriors who performed the sacrifice of the child, together with the child, had to overcome a fear of death. As the document proceeded, it became clear that the sacrifice was a ritualized enactment of the process that permitted everyone to access the "secrets," "magic," and "power."

The process is what enabled their culture to grow; the ritual was enacted each year at the time of the planting of their crops as a reminder to the people of the process of engenderment. Today most of the descendants are unaware of the chronicle that the Spanish clergy helped their ancestors to write, though they continue to inhabit the same geographical area fearlessly vulnerable to a political power out of their control. Nonetheless, they live their lives according to the age-old sense-making process reenacted in various ways, including the telling of new legends.

Kellehear's point, it seems to me, was that as much as these NDEs are like fairy tales for children, they are nonetheless deadly serious. Dying is being used to set individual and social records straight. Kellehear's point was also the point of a directional. We orient ourselves within accounts of NDEs and Creation myths. Constantly having to take readings of our horizon to know where we are, we watch for

the new rise of an old star, much the same as ancient Mesoamericans awaited the cyclical rise of Venus, which was believed to die and then be reborn. Today with new sightings come updated images of who we think we are, dealing with our problems, overcoming, as Kellehear wrote, the contradictions associated with the worlds of spirit, culture, and nature.

"Popular imagination" reorients us to knowledge about ourselves. Dreams and schemes, legends and tales, ideas, resourcefulness, creativity, and whims guised as an elder's dialogue, a midwife's healing, a shaman's antics, a root doctor's cure, a farmer's calendrics, a mother's intuition, a brother's love, a dying child's dream, or a cardiac patient's flawless memory, as I see it, are examples of "traditional knowledge." NDEs, like Creation myths with roots in death, as far as I can tell, are ingenious "set-ups," profound bits of folklore by which we make sense of our world, our societies, and ourselves. Kellehear has pointed us in a direction; it would be interesting to proceed.

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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