

Journal
of
Near-Death Studies

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Allan Kellehear, Ph.D.

**Over My Dead Body There Is an Ideal Utopia: Comments on Kellehear's
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Glimpses of Utopia Near Death? A Rejoinder • *Allan Kellehear, Ph.D.*

Announcement

Volume 10, Number 2, Winter 1991



Editor

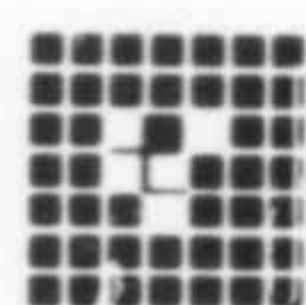
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HUMAN SCIENCES PRESS, INC.

233 Spring Street, New York, New York 10013-1578

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JOURNAL OF NEAR-DEATH STUDIES (formerly ANABIOSIS) is sponsored by the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS). The Journal publishes articles on near-death experiences and on the empirical effects and theoretical implications of such events, and on such related phenomena as out-of-body experiences, deathbed visions, the experiences of dying persons, comparable experiences occurring under other circumstances, and the implications of such phenomena for our understanding of human consciousness and its relation to the life and death processes. The Journal is committed to an unbiased exploration of these issues, and specifically welcomes a variety of theoretical perspectives and interpretations that are grounded in empirical observation or research.

The **INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR NEAR-DEATH STUDIES (IANDS)** is a world-wide organization of scientists, scholars, near-death experiencers, and the general public, dedicated to the exploration of near-death experiences (NDEs) and their implications. Incorporated as a nonprofit educational and research organization in 1981, IANDS' objectives are to encourage and support research into NDEs and related phenomena; to disseminate knowledge concerning NDEs and their implications; to further the utilization of near-death research by health care and counseling professionals; to form local chapters of near-death experiencers and interested others; to sponsor symposia and conferences on NDEs and related phenomena; and to maintain a library and archives of near-death-related material. Friends of IANDS chapters are affiliated support groups in many cities for NDErs and their families and for health care and counseling professionals to network locally. Information about membership in IANDS can be obtained by writing to IANDS, Department of Psychiatry, University of Connecticut Health Center, Farmington, CT 06032.

MANUSCRIPTS should be submitted in triplicate to Bruce Greyson, M.D., Department of Psychiatry, University of Connecticut Health Center, Farmington, CT 06032. See inside back cover for style requirements.

SUBSCRIPTION inquiries and subscription orders should be addressed to the publisher at Subscription Department, Human Sciences Press, Inc., 233 Spring Street, New York, N.Y. 10013-1578 or faxed to the Subscription Department at its number (212) 807-1047. Subscription rates:

Volume 10, 1991-1992 (4 issues) \$110.00 (outside the U.S., \$130.00). Price for individual subscribers certifying that the journal is for their personal use, \$36.00 (outside the U.S., \$45.00).

ADVERTISING inquiries should be addressed to the Advertising Sales Representative, Daniel S. Lipner, Weston Media Associates, P.O. Box 1110, Greens Farms, Connecticut 06436—telephone (203) 261-2500 and fax (203) 261-0101.

INDEXED IN Psychological Abstracts, Parapsychology Abstracts International, Social Work Research and Abstracts, Sage Family Abstracts, Health Instrument File, and International Bibliography of Periodical Literature.

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Editor's Foreword

From time to time we have chosen to devote an entire issue of the *Journal* to a particularly controversial lead article, followed by several commentaries from different perspectives. Previous issues exploiting that format have addressed topics as disparate as a cross-cultural counseling approach to near-death experiencers (Fall 1987), a theory of postmortem survival based on electromagnetic radiation emitted upon death (Winter 1987), and a neurobiological model for near-death experiences (Summer 1989). Each of these issues began with a carefully reasoned and articulated minority opinion within near-death studies, followed with a variety of critiques representing the multidisciplinary makeup of our readers, and ended with a rebuttal from the lead article's author(s).

In this issue, we again focus on an innovative but controversial approach to near-death studies. Australian sociologist Allan Kellehear's lead article attempts to provide a new understanding of the near-death experience (NDE) by bypassing arguments about its "reality" and focusing instead on its sociocultural significance. Kellehear compares the social structure of the afterlife as described by some NDErs with various hypothetical ideal societies. He argues that the NDE as inspirational narrative helps us re-evaluate our present world and contributes to our longstanding search for the ideal society.

Kellehear's methodology and conclusions are critiqued by five commentators who provide differing perspectives on the social implications of near-death experiences: religious scholars Carl Becker and Howard Mickel; anthropologists Patricia Weibust and Antonia Mills; and sociologist Kathy Charmaz.

In his closing response to these commentaries, Kellehear answers some of the questions these critiques raised and summarizes those areas that need further study. While the methodology of sociological analysis of NDEs remains a matter of controversy, we hope this issue will stimulate other scholars to pursue this relatively new approach to the NDE.

This issue concludes with an announcement of the relocation of IANDS' central office from Philadelphia to a new site in Hartford, Connecticut.

Bruce Greyson, M.D.

Near-Death Experiences and the Pursuit of the Ideal Society

Allan Kellehear, Ph.D.
La Trobe University

ABSTRACT: Up to one half of near-death experiencers report a social and physical realm beyond death. I describe the features of this afterlife society and compare them with previous ideas about the ideal society. I argue that the society so often mentioned by near-death experiencers is a unique type of utopian society. As stories from utopia, near-death experiences (NDEs) serve as inspirational narratives that help us re-evaluate the social world and our place in it. They also help integrate sometimes contradictory paradigms from religion, politics, and science. In this way, NDE narratives may be seen as the latest chapter in a long search for better social ideas about living harmoniously with each other.

For most of this century the social science literature dealing with death and dying has been explicit about one issue: Death is a dark country. Never far away, its major cities are Loss, Grief, and Aloneness. Recently, however, a new viewpoint has emerged. Beyond that first shadowy country lies another, less inhospitable land. Indeed, this is a land of fabulous light and landscape. And in this country the cities are called Learning, Love, and Service. This is the place many people describe when recovering from the near-death experience (NDE).

Less astonishing certainly, but equally intriguing, is the curious paucity of sociological literature about this strange society. Is this society, and its cities and citizenry, the latest, modern notion of paradise? Do these visions and values of the Good Life bespeak a renewed desire for some lost arcadia or golden age? Or do these visions in the

Allan Kellehear, Ph.D., is a Lecturer in Sociology at La Trobe University. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Kellehear at the Department of Sociology, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria 3083, Australia.

final moments of consciousness reveal, at death's door, a final yearning for utopia?

The aim of this essay is to examine the transcendental features of the NDE that depict another social world beyond this one. I will not attempt here to evaluate the reality of these reports. Rather my purpose is to treat the reports of, and writing about, transcendental NDEs as narratives that may be read and interpreted for their assumptions and allusions about the ideal society.

In this way, I argue that NDEs are social images that, whatever else they may be, belong to the historical and social discourse about the ideal society. The identification and examination of this otherworldly society permit a cultural analysis that furthers our understanding of NDEs as sociological phenomena. If visions of this otherworldly society are prompting people to change their social values and lifestyle, then it is important to understand why. Many of these changes undoubtedly derive from the social and psychological crisis of being near death (Kellehear, 1990). However, another part of this understanding must come from the possibility that the social images of this ideal society may also be prompting or inspiring some of these changes. Furthermore, treating the NDE as part of a discourse about the ideal society makes it possible for us to explore and re-evaluate our social ideas about personal identity, social change, deviance and control, and issues of cultural and social representation. In exploring the transcendental features of the NDE I attempt to answer two questions. First, what kind of ideal society is this society that so many NDEers encounter? Second, how does this conception of the ideal society differ from earlier types?

In developing answers to these two questions I organize the paper in the following manner. The first section will identify the type of NDE in which people report seeing another society. For the purposes of this paper I shall call the society at the center of these reports the "transcendent society." I will then describe the social features of this society such as we know them from various NDE accounts. I draw here mainly on Craig Lundahl's (1981-82) early work in this area. The next section will examine the transcendent society by comparing its features with five types of ideal society as outlined and discussed by J.C. Davis (1981, 1984). In this respect, the early work of Lundahl is extended through the application of Davis' typology of the ideal society. The final section will discuss the transcendent society as a utopia with unique social properties. I argue that, as a utopian form, the transcendent society reawakens the pursuit of the ideal society. This is a pursuit that has largely faltered this century because of several historical and concep-

tual problems. Many of these difficulties are overcome by the transcendent society.

The Transcendent Society

The overwhelming majority of reported NDEs are positive experiences. Bruce Greyson (1983) identified three distinct types of positive NDE. These are the cognitive type, which exhibit features such as time distortion, thought acceleration, life review, and sudden understanding; the affective type, which exhibits features such as feelings of joy, cosmic unity, peace, and an experience of light; and the transcendental type, which exhibits features such as encounters with an unearthly realm populated by beings and a "barrier or point of no return" that if crossed would preclude return to life. It is this transcendental type of NDE on which this paper focuses for details of a society beyond death.

Greyson (1983) estimated that 42.7% of his sample of NDErs experienced the transcendental type of NDE. Michael Sabom (1982), who divided the NDE into two types, the autoscopic and the transcendental type, estimated that over half of his sample of NDErs had encountered some other social world beyond this one. More modest incidences were reported by the Evergreen study (34.5%) (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981) and Kenneth Ring's experiencer sample (20%) (1980). Furthermore, George Gallup (1982) estimated that some eight million Americans may have experienced an NDE. Significant numbers of these are presumably familiar with aspects of the transcendent society.

In the NDE literature descriptions of the transcendent society are often the spectacular finale in an ideal composite portrayal of the NDE. Researchers such as Raymond Moody (1975), Ring (1980), Sabom (1982), Margot Grey (1985), and Carol Zaleski (1987) all developed their analyses by moving from the basic cognitive-affective features of the NDE to the descriptions of an unearthly realm. As with many features of the NDE, the reports of this society are highly similar. This notwithstanding, the details of the transcendent society are admittedly few. As Zaleski (1987) noted, the emphasis in most descriptions is on the message of love, learning, and personal and social transformation. However, as sparse as these details may seem, it is still possible to discern salient features of organization and process that would locate this kind of society in the context of others.

Lundahl (1981-82) provided the most systematic social and physical description of this other world, based on his review of the NDE literature and nine selected accounts of Mormon NDEs. The physical world

in the NDE is a world of beautiful skies and lush vegetation. Criss-crossed by streams, dotted by lakes, there are also forests, lawns, parks, and gardens that contain flowers of unique and unprecedented beauty (Lundahl, 1981-82). Sight, movement, and mental abilities are increased in capability, allowing greater vision, faster travel, and sharper cognitive ability. Although there appear to be idyllic rural environments, there also appear to be cities and many buildings such as halls, houses, and temples. Cities contain libraries, places of higher learning, and living areas (Lundahl, 1981-82; Elder, 1987; Moody, 1988).

The social climate was described by Lundahl (1981-82) as largely one of contentment, happiness, harmony, and order. It is highly organized and conversely eschews disorder and confusion. Apparently people in this society work; that is, they have occupations that are often tied to some sort of human service industry (Gallup, 1982). Interaction is based on cooperation in general, but sanctions do exist to control deviance (Lundahl, 1981-82).

The social system is stratified, apparently along moral lines. The society is divided into different communities or levels of activity and order based on different degrees of moral progression. Problem groups are confined to certain areas so they are restrained from disrupting the smooth operation of other communities (Lundahl, 1981-82). The means and criteria by which such people are restrained are not clear.

As extraordinary as this description of the transcendent society must seem, it is nevertheless incomplete for another reason aside from the brevity of most NDEs' visits. Other societies with similar characteristics, or other cultural communities within this one single community, also apparently exist. There are suggestions of a transcendent society in Melanesian (Counts, 1983), Indian (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986), and Chinese (Becker, 1981, 1983; Hermann, 1990) NDE accounts. For example, in the Melanesian version of NDE, the society beyond is also a beautiful and well-ordered place. No cities are reported but instead there are descriptions of villages. In these villages people are also described as working, constructing buildings or participating in traditional song and dance. Social control is also part of the work of this society; Dorothy Counts (1983) reported the trial of a sorcerer.

In most cases, NDEs report their reluctance to leave that well-ordered world beyond. As some of Ring's (1984, p. 91) respondents expressed it:

"The most depressed, the most severe anxiety I've ever had was at the moment I realized I must return to this earth."

"I began to realize that I was going to have to leave and I didn't want to leave" [begins to cry].

Not all NDErs feel this strongly about their return. However, even those who desire to return often leave with a sense of regret because they are leaving such a beautiful and attractive place. The extraordinary nature of their story of revival plus their accounts of another realm have also fired the imaginations of millions of nonNDErs.

No doubt that this description of a society is an ideal, indeed idealized, society. The sociological question is now: what kind of ideal society is this?

Davis' Typology of the Ideal Society

In theoretical terms, the literature examining utopias and other forms of the ideal society tends to fall into two categories. On the one hand, some writers are reluctant to broach the task of definition for fear of excluding some types of society. Frank and Fritzie Manuel (Manuel & Manuel, 1979) avoided definition of major concepts such as Utopia for fear of obscuring what they argue to be the pluralist nature of utopia (Alexander and Gill, 1984). This is a similar line of argument taken by Krishnan Kumar (1987).

On the other hand, writers such as Davis (1981, 1984) argued that definition is not only possible but desirable precisely because of the ambiguity of the concept. Toward this end, Davis provided a typology of ideal societies common in Western history. In this task, Davis maintained that definitions are important for clarity but that they do not have to be distinct and mathematical in construction; they do not have to be airtight. My view of this debate is that it is precision rather than definition that is problematical. Karl Mannheim (1960) provided a very precise distinction between ideological and utopian forms of consciousness. Utopias are ultimately realizable ideas and programs, while ideological ones are not (Walters, 1989). The problem with this view is that we must wait until the end of history to identify which is which, a situation that questions the usefulness of the criterion (Alexander, 1984). Davis' typology allows us to identify and understand types of ideal society by their commonly occurring features. They are, in Max Weber's (1947) sense "ideal-typical" categories; that is, they are approximations that permit variety. They are not intended to pinpoint but rather guide our thinking about the history of ideas concerning the ideal society.

Davis (1981, 1984) outlined the social and political features of five types of ideal society: cockaygne, arcadia, moral commonwealth, millennium, and utopia. I will examine each of these in turn and assess their applicability to the society reported in transcendental NDE states.

Cockaygne

The cockaygne society has been described as the "poor man's paradise." This type of society exists in idyllic physical surroundings and material privileges and sensual gratification. Every whim and appetite is instantly and handsomely satisfied. A desire for food is immediately met by banquets of desirable items, which may be chosen on overloaded and groaning tables or fed directly into one's mouth without effort. Sexual desire is catered for by the instant appearance of beautiful, willing, and most able partners. The "Land of Cockaygne" was most prominent as a set of ideas about the ideal society around late medieval Europe (Davis, 1981).

Davis (1981, p. 21) cited a marvelous poem from the period that amply illustrated the spirit of cockaygne:

Ah, those chambers and those walls!
 All of pasties stand the walls,
 Of fish and flesh and all rich meat,
 The tastiest that men can eat.
 Wheaten cakes the shingles all,
 Of church, of cloister, bower and hall.
 The pinnacles are fat puddings,
 Good food for princes or for kings.
 Every man takes what he will,
 As of right, to eat his fill.
 All is common to young and old,
 To stout and strong, to meek and old.

The poem ends with the final message about work and payment.

Every man may drink his fill
 and needn't sweat to pay the bill

In cockaygne, the vision of ideal living is largely an escapist peasant one. In this respect, freedom from work and hunger are the main obsessions. The medieval social order is reversed in cockaygne, where peasants enjoy unrestrained decadence and the upper classes toil chin-

deep for years in dirt and filth before they are able to indulge in any pleasures. The social order is maintained because appetites are always satisfied rather than because the basic organization of society has altered.

The transcendent society has some environmental similarities with cockaygne. It is a place that is perpetually beautiful and garden-like. In the transcendent society, as in cockaygne, there is no death. However, in cockaygne total wish fulfillment prevails.

Although many needs are apparently gratified in the transcendent society, there are no reports of cockaygne-like indulgence. In fact, except for the occasional report of fruit on trees, food appears conspicuous only by its absence (Brookesmith, 1984). Also difficult to locate in modern accounts of NDEs are any descriptions of sexual activity. If eating and sexual activity were as prominent in the transcendent society as cockaygne, the difficulty of locating these accounts would indeed be unusual. Finally, the cockaygne life is an idle one, without work or care for it. The transcendent society is one, however, where work is a conspicuous feature of social life. Buildings and service to others do not "just happen" but are provided for by fellow beings who fully plan and participate in the processes of this work. Clearly the transcendent society is no cockaygne.

Arcadia

The arcadian society is a cockaygne-like society with restraint. Set in idyllic surroundings once again, human beings display their dignity through exercising their moral and aesthetic sense. This restricts appetite, and so abundance is temperate and somewhat modest in comparison to the "Land of Cockaygne." In a society of plenty people nevertheless do not overindulge but rather satisfy their needs, such as they are. We can also observe some of this feature in the transcendent society. Grey (1985, p. 54), for example, cited the meeting of one NDEr with his deceased mother.

I found myself standing in front of a nice prefab (inexpensive and prefabricated dwelling that can be erected very quickly and was extensively used during World War II to house bombed out victims). There was a path leading up to the front door with masses of nasturtiums on either side. The door was open and I could see my mother inside. I thought, "That's funny, my mum always wanted a prefab and she always loved nasturtiums."

It is not important here to ascertain in whose mind the prefab/nasturtium existence was truly ideal, the NDEr or his mother. It is sufficient only to note that basic desires are being fulfilled in this transcendent society. People's needs are being met, but not disproportionate to their desires, and their desires seem appropriate to their former lives and backgrounds. However, once again, the arcadian existence, largely inspired by romantic, medieval notions of primitive life in the New World, is largely an idyllic life (Davis, 1981). Work is not an integral and socially important activity for arcadia, and yet it is for the transcendent society.

Perfect Moral Commonwealth

In this type of ideal society, people apply more restraint on themselves, tolerate some hardship, and basically want for the greater good. In the idea of the moral commonwealth is found the first major social shift away from the self and its needs, toward the needs and welfare of the wider community. The notion of regulation is formally introduced as an integral and important part of this ideal society. As the name implies, the whole wealth and work of every individual must be dedicated to the common good (Davis, 1981).

The philosophy and sociology of the moral commonwealth turns on the idea of moral individualism. This kind of society does not depend on structural reorganization but rather the willingness of individuals to do their duty. Moral rearmament of the individual rather than changing the political and social system brings about the ideal, harmonious society. Control and regulation is contained within the individual. The problem of evil and deviance is inextricably bound up with the problem of personal discipline and values (Davis, 1981).

In the near-death experience, the values of personal change and moral development are encouraged in the transcendent society in a context of social support, human warmth, and love. Nevertheless, the transcendent society has apparently not left its organization dependent on the combined efforts or willingness of individuals to maintain its order. Social regulation is clearly evident and, unlike some examples of the moral commonwealth (Davis, 1981), magistrates are not redundant (Counts, 1983).

As described by Lundahl (1981-82, pp. 323-24), formal sanctions are enforced and, although there exist many "self acting and self thinking" individuals, more than a few people are restrained, presumably against their will. A governing order that exerts some sort and degree

of authority and control acts as a regulatory social system. This is clearly a system that takes deviance for granted and does not expect uniform moral restraint by all individuals, at least initially. The moral commonwealth model of ideal society, dependent as it is on individual moral restraint, does not appear to be the basis of the transcendent society.

Millenium

The ideal society of the millenarians is one where human beings and nature itself are transformed by apocalyptic forces external to both. After purging of the manifold problem features and groups within humanity a new world order emerges (Davis, 1984). Linked closely to the history of Christianity, the apocalyptic event is commonly Christ's Second Coming. However, the millenium applies to any religious movement and is an ideology of salvation that stresses perfection on earth facilitated by supernatural beings (Davis, 1981). In social terms, the transcendent society is least like the millenarian society.

First, the appearance of the transcendent society is not linked to any ideology of salvation. That is to say, entry into that ideal form of society is not dependent on membership in any religious movement. Second, perfection on earth is not stressed. The transcendent society is an order that exists beyond, but alongside, our own, and does not represent a future transformation of our own time and place. Furthermore, the transcendent society does not itself assume human perfection, as my earlier remarks about deviance and control suggest. Rather, moral and social evolution is assumed to be a process that may begin on earth, definitely continues in the transcendent society, and may be completed there in some distant and unclear time and place within that society. Finally, the role of supernatural beings in the transcendent society is different from that in millenarian conceptions. Some NDErs do observe, or believe they observe, religious figures in the transcendent world but these are often simply guides, life review facilitators, or part of a welcoming party. Some apocalyptic changes have been forecast for our world and its societies (Ring 1984, 1988), and some of these have suggested a new emerging order. This order, however, has never been confused or identified with the transcendent society of the NDE. That society apparently remains distinct and otherworldly.

The transcendent society is not a millenarian society though some who visit there may bring the occasional millenarian message. Mille-

narians search for meanings in personal experience and the world around them like everyone else. But unlike many others, millenarians often find this meaning in ideas about the afterlife, in what John Harrison (1984) described as "Holy Utopias." The path to this utopian vision is through apocalyptic and supernatural intervention. For the NDEr the path to the ideal society is simply and less dramatically through death. This notwithstanding, the paths of millenarians and NDErs may often converge, even when their purposes and ideas are not always the same (Harrison, 1984).

Utopia

According to Davis (1981), utopias may be distinguished from other forms of ideal society by their approach to the problem of human willfulness, deviance, and unlimited appetite. In utopia there is no wishing away of problems as in cockayne. Nor is there at the center of utopian vision and planning the need for a great purging, as in the millenium. Rather, social systems must be designed to take account of social problems such as crime, hostilities, and exploitation. Organizations must provide education and social control to enable the collective to attain greater good and harmony, but also to keep checks on the incorrigible, the corrupt, and the slack. As Davis (1981, p. 38) observed,

The perfect moral commonwealth tradition idealises man (sic). The land of cockayne idealises nature, in an admittedly gross way. In Arcadia, too, nature is idealised but at the same time man is naturalised. In utopia, it is neither man nor nature that is idealised but organisation. The utopian seeks to 'solve' the collective problem collectively, that is by the reorganisation of society and its institutions, by education, by laws and by sanctions.

Utopias are total physical and social constructions, total environments, whose goals are social order and the ultimate perfection of humanity through collective effort. This is quite a good description of the transcendent society described in so many NDEs.

As Lundahl (1981-82) has remarked, the transcendent society emphasizes harmony and organization. Order in both moral and social terms is the hallmark of that society. Education and social control of deviance is commonplace. Education, as a formal place for gaining knowledge, frequently takes place in classroom-like settings similar to our own societies. Learning, in both formal-educational and informal-socialization senses, is an important feature of the transcendent soci-

ety. As in most utopian visions, people are free agents, but this is a *freedom from* disorder and moral chaos. The citizens of utopian societies are not *free to* do as they please, if this means creating confusion or doing wrong things to others (Davis 1981 p. 388).

Another way in which these values and images of the transcendent society are utopian is their function as social criticism. Utopian thought is always, partly at least, a rejection of the contemporary world and its processes (Davis, 1984). They contribute to a "climate of opinion" (Goodwin, 1984) that stimulates others to take up the policy, theory, or social action. In this respect, the basic organization of the transcendent society conveys value systems that are utopian. Values important to NDErs, such as cooperation, humanism, and self development, are implicit criticism of other values such as competition, selfishness, and authoritarianism. Utopian values display and highlight rather than supply a specific outline of a new morality. They are inspirational rather than prescriptive.

The transcendent society, and the tales from there, act as narratives by which we may orient ourselves, our cultures, and our roles and ambitions within them. In these ways, utopias are to adults what fairytales are to children (Alexander, 1984). They draw on current feelings and problems about the world and inspire both audiences to higher things, without ever becoming a dense legislature. This is a commonly observed role for utopian imagery (Bloch, 1988). This inspirational role makes utopias responsible for introducing, or renewing, a new and better set of human values. In the case of the transcendent society where the values are simply learning, love, and service, the task may arguably be one of renewal and revision.

The importance of promoting harmony, of cooperation and love, are the chief characteristics of social intercourse in the transcendent society, as indeed they may be with NDErs themselves. In these above respects the transcendent society, or what little we know about it, seems to meet Davis' general criteria for a utopian society. In these terms, the transcendent society is a total physical and social environment whose goals are human perfection, social order, and harmony. Furthermore, like Thomas More's *Utopia*, it is a society supposedly already in existence rather than being a prescriptive or futuristic entity. In this respect, the transcendent society belongs to that tradition of literature where a person or group of travelers stumble by accident upon another society. Their accounts simply describe what they see, experience, and do along with their incredulity and admiration (Kumar, 1987). In this tradition of utopian literature, these places often have cities of "a structurally fabulous kind," "miraculous trans-

port and strange animals and people" (Alexander, 1984, p. 37). The transcendent society is characterised by many of these features too, but it is nevertheless not simply and merely a utopian society like many before it. On the contrary, the transcendent society is a utopian society with several unique features.

A Unique Utopia

If the transcendent society is utopian it is no ordinary utopia within the strict terms by which Davis outlined his typology. It is true that social organization and values of the transcendent society are utopian in their regulation of work, deviance, and education. In this respect, the social organization is the chief agency of socialization and control. However, the need for individuals to take responsibility for the shaping and nurturance of their own values is also strongly present. This is, for example, a common idea running through NDErs' reviews of their lives both during and after their NDEs. This social dimension of the transcendent society is somewhat akin to the prescriptions of the moral commonwealth.

Although utopia's main task is the transformation of humankind, nature also seems perfected and idyllic in the transcendent society. Here we witness elements of cockayne. But restraint does co-exist with the satisfaction of a wide and mixed array of needs and, in this respect, there exist elements of arcadia. Although the transcendent society is not millenarian, we have also noted millenarian elements that overlap, particularly the pareschatological direction and dynamism that NDErs and millenarians draw upon for their images.

So the transcendent society is utopian but, as it were, in a simple postmodern sense (Bradbury, 1988). It has a postmodern style first because, as I have demonstrated, the transcendent society is a pistache of previous conceptions of the ideal society, and features these as important parts of its own structure. Second, the transcendent society as utopian imagery is critical of some modern values (e.g. competition, materialism) while co-opting and promoting others (e.g. humanism, spiritualism) (Zaleski, 1987). Finally, the transcendent society as utopia is, because of its eclecticism, able to reconcile criticism and paradoxes that often confronted other utopias. Other modern utopias experienced tensions between rampant individualism (e.g. benevolent despotism, divine rule) and mindless collectivism (e.g. Orwellian totalitarianism). Cultural development often occurred together with its destructive consequences for nature. However, the transcendent soci-

ety is a utopian society where social control is tempered and tamed by individualism so that Big Brother does not convert one person's utopia into another's dystopic nightmare. Work and cultural development help transform people while the world of flowers and brooks remains Eden-like, maintained and protected in some mysterious way from the usual ravages of damage and exploitation.

The images of the transcendent society in the NDE stimulate a sense of interconnectedness in NDErs and those who read or hear their stories. These images appear to overcome the contradictions and problems associated with the worlds of spirit, culture, and nature. The tensions between culture and nature are reconciled in the arcadian images of people appreciating the effect of their own needs on each other and the environment. The value of restraint is learned in the context of a new appreciation of the interconnectedness of human action within the social and physical universe. The many attempts to explain the NDE as a human experience have also seen several attempts to bridge the perceived gap and tension between religious and scientific paradigms (Zaleski, 1987; Fenske, 1990).

This is a special type of utopia, essentially utopian in a modern sense but at the same time featuring social elements from many ideal societies favored and pursued in the past. Because of these features, the transcendent society is able to field common criticisms of utopias by overcoming contradictions that have plagued other conceptions. Little wonder the transcendent society and the NDE in general have captured the popular imagination. In this important way NDEs have reawakened the pursuit of the ideal society after nearly a century of collective pessimism. This historical characteristic makes the transcendent society unique in another way.

As utopia, the transcendent society represents a very special type of ideal society emerging, or reemerging, as it does, in the late twentieth century. This is because, as Kumar (1987, p. 380) observed, this century has been host to the claim that "utopia is dead." There have been too many events this century that have dampened optimism and discouraged utopia. The world wars, Nazism, Stalinism, Pol Pot, Hiroshima, the Cold War and the arms race, and recently the collapse of Eastern Bloc Communism have battered and dismantled the earlier romantic visions of nineteenth century utopian writing.

Despite this, some utopias have survived, for example, the kibbutzim, science fiction utopias, and New Age consciousness writing. Among other developments, the writings of Marshall McLuhan, Timothy Leary, Herbert Marcuse, Charles Reich, and Ivan Illich have all served the sporadic and apparently indomitable pursuit of the ideal

society. Within the darkened recesses of twentieth century pessimism these experiments and writings have supplied, or attempted to supply, new ways of resolving the problems of living with the urban industrial cultures of modernity.

But Kumar (1987) argued that these have not become the central symbols for society but rather have flourished as specific visions for specific groups. Certain cults, communes, social movements, and types of social theory have been peddlers and adherents of these various utopian inspirations.

Here, however, Kumar overstated his case, confusing the lack of popularity with the problem of cultural representativeness. It is true that many of the utopian visions this century have been group specific in their attractions. However, the pursuit of alternative utopian visions as a generalized pursuit in itself has in fact been widely representative, but in a special sense. Although twentieth century utopias have often not been representative in the content of their social ideas, they have been in the sense of their creative source. There has been a widespread dissatisfaction with modern social conditions and values, and consequently a pursuit of better. Products of this discontent can be seen in the steady growth and acceptance of feminist, environmentalist, self-sufficiency, prodemocracy, and social network ideas, and their impact in the spheres of politics, the workplace, and family and household, to name only a few. In this respect, utopias as forms of alternative social knowledge actually depend for their very appearance upon a *widespread* dissatisfaction with the existing world (Walters, 1989). This complements Zaleski's observation (1987) that NDEs occur most when cultures cause social and moral dislocation and there develops a widespread need for orientation. So the revision that must apply to the received twentieth century wisdom that "utopia is dead" is simply that lately this century, a widely attractive utopia has been difficult to discern. However, the widespread *desire* and *pursuit* of utopian social ideas are alive and well and historically accounted for.

In this context, the transcendent society is an exceptional utopia not because its images and values draw from this same source of social discontent but rather more remarkably because these images do not arise from any one social group. Furthermore, despite some cultural variation in NDE imagery, the basic organization and ideas of the transcendent society remain fairly stable. Village huts that float above the ground (Counts, 1983) may indeed replace cities in some versions of the transcendent society, but the values of order, cooperation, kindness, and learning appear to be stable, at least widely reported, ideas.

As such, the transcendent society as utopia provides a set of ideas

widely representative in aspiration and constitution. It is therefore widely appealing as an ideal form of society. Furthermore, the rise and popularity of NDE imagery in industrial societies suggests and highlights a general dissatisfaction with the depersonalizing and alienating conditions within them. For those who have not experienced an NDE, this imagery becomes a rich kind of thought exercise (Alexander and Gill, 1984) or "mode of visualising" (Davis, 1981, p. 370) that fires the social imagination. To place this observation within the utopian discourse is to say that it is conceivability of the ideas and values rather than the achievability of any actual social system that becomes important (Alexander and Gill, 1984). The traditional debate over the realizability of utopias is not as important here. As Peter Beilharz (1989) observed, one of the social functions of utopian social ideas is to sharpen our understanding of current political and moral dilemmas. It is this function that may characterize and take precedence in a post-modern form of utopia such as the transcendent society.

Conclusion

Zaleski (1987) argued that NDEs are not widely attractive utopias. Rehearsing a similar argument to Kumar (1987), Zaleski believed this is because NDEs are unable to be a widely shared basis for a new philosophy. This, in turn, is due to a lack of symbolic power wider traditions such as medieval NDEs once had. But Zaleski underestimated the attraction of NDEs to wider social movements stimulated by rapid and disruptive social changes that had their beginnings in the Industrial Revolution. These changes have continued to fragment and disorientate through two world wars and innumerable domestic and international conflicts and divisions. In this context, many have overlooked the possibility that the attracting power in NDE may indeed be part of a wider tradition, the pursuit of the ideal society.

A long tradition, in evidence in national politics and religion, social theory and social movements, the pursuit of the ideal society bloomed in the romantic climate of nineteenth century western idealism. The course of the twentieth century has seen utopia as a social idea and experiment falter as people exchanged hopes of harmony for peace, and then hope of peace for mere tolerance. But the obstacles to a widely attractive set of utopian images were also ironically the driving incentive for the continuation of its pursuit, albeit in small but important social experiments, in less popular but no less influential social theory and literature. The modern challenge confronting utopias has been the

development of a set of images that might cross different social groups and boundaries but might nevertheless inspire and unite each in similar ways.

The transcendent society appears to be a utopia whose features can be seen as attractive to a whole array of different groups and, as I have argued, this may be one reason for the popularity of NDEs. Despite this popularity, the transcendent society may not be a high profile utopia, offering as it does only a pocketful of assorted and simple values and very little in the way of social programs and policies. To our recently dark notions of death, and in our pursuit of the ideal society against the even darker cynicism of our times, the ideas of the transcendent society may appear only as dim candlelight. But in beginning the long task of rebuilding optimism and a shared view of a better society, that may just be enough.

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Over My Dead Body There Is an Ideal Utopia: Comments on Kellehear's Paper

Carl B. Becker, Ph.D.
Tsukuba University

ABSTRACT: Allan Kellehear's near-death experiencers (NDErs) report perceiving a utopia beyond death. I examine the logical implications and philosophical possibilities of such a realm, and come to three conclusions. First, the realms described by NDErs, if taken at face value, are far from utopian, rather resembling travelers' romances with exotic lands. Second, any truly utopian postmortem society is so far removed from our present world as to be morally irrelevant to our own. And third, only an ideational postmortem utopia, of the sort exemplified by Pure Land Buddhist theology, can avoid both the non-utopian nature of NDErs' descriptions and the irrelevance of postmortem utopias.

Allan Kellehear is becoming recognized as a highly creative and enterprising young sociologist who tackles topics beyond the province of old-guard sociology. His articles on near-death experiences (NDEs) in China (Kellehear, Heaven, and Gao, 1990) and in shipwrecked sailors (Kellehear, 1990) are important advances in the understanding of cultural visions. I was pleased to see his latest contribution, "Near-Death Experiences and the Pursuit of the Ideal Society," but that article raised as many problems as it answered. Some of these were problems of Kellehear's methodology, but others demanded further philosophical and sociological clarification.

Kellehear bracketed all discussion of the "reality" of NDEs. This was politically a wise move to avoid a debate irrelevant to his sociological

Carl B. Becker, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Tsukuba University. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Becker at the Institute of Philosophy, Tsukuba University, Tsukuba City 305, Japan.

focus. He treated NDEs as images only potentially valuable for what they tell us about human dreams and disaffections with present societies. Yet sometimes he wrote as if these visions had an external reality of their own, not arising from within the mind of the perceiver, but appearing to the perceiver from without. At times, he even implied that these NDE utopias might be real realms of postmortem human activity in their own right. If his methodological strategy was to set aside all concern with the reality of these visions in order to focus solely on their social and psychological implications, then he should have consistently followed that approach.

Kellehear's NDErs reported perceiving an apparent utopia. I accept Kellehear's bracketing the real existence of such a utopia; whether it really exists is not at issue here. Instead, I will examine their assertion from a philosophical perspective. Three issues arise. First, could a utopia of the sort these NDErs saw even be intelligibly *conceived*? I argue that NDErs' assertions contradict the idea of a utopia.

Second, would a utopia of the sort these NDErs saw have any moral implications for earthbound humans in pursuit of the ideal society? I argue that any truly utopian postmortem society is so far removed from our present world as to be morally useless. Third, what interpretation of NDErs' descriptions could conceive a utopia neither internally contradictory nor irrelevant to our moral development in pursuit of the ideal society? I argue that the Buddhist Pure Land utopia both avoids internal contradictions and provides hints toward human morality.

Internal Problems in the Utopia of Kellehear's NDErs

There are three elements of Kellehear's NDErs' descriptions that pose insurmountable problems in the construction of a coherent image of utopia. They are that this NDEr-derived utopia has physical objects and spatial limits, moral rules expected and enforced by the society, and no death. I argue that each of these factors conflicts with the assertion that this society is anything like a utopia.

Physical Limitations and Moral Problems

Many of the moral evils of our human condition arise precisely because people want things or positions that exist in limited quan-

tities. Even in utopia, apparently not everyone can be rich and famous. If intellectual or spiritual or moral merit of any kind is recognized in utopia, then there will still be a hierarchy, as Kellehear implied, a pecking order in which some people are more equal than others, and there will still be incentives to have or be something "better" than the next guy.

If there are still bodies, then some are going to be stronger or more handsome than others. If there are still cars or buildings or banquets, some are going to be faster or larger or tastier than others. Utopians will want more and "better" things than they presently have, especially if someone else already has more or better. Thus we are shunted back into the realm of competition, which the cooperative spirit of utopia was supposed to have made unnecessary, if not immoral. Put conversely, if there are things and limits to things in a postmortem society, they will militate against the utopian character of that realm.

Social Rules and Moral Problems

Kellehear's informants called their utopia a moral realm. Kellehear repeatedly alluded to the virtues that prevail in the realm of the utopian NDE: order, cooperation, self-development, learning, service, humanism, spiritualism, and kindness. However, most problems of morality arise not because people disagree with such values, but because they don't know how to act when these values at times conflict with each other.

For example, self-development and learning are inescapably individual values that result in the improvement and exaltation of the self; whereas values of cooperation and service result in the improvement and exaltation of the group or the "other." In utopia as on earth, individuals must choose whether to put personal freedom and priorities before or after those of the group.

Likewise, the values of courage and honesty may conflict with kindness and harmony. Should I choose courageously and honestly to expose problems, if doing so will not solve them but only scar other people's feelings? Or should I follow the dictates of kindness and harmony, remaining silent at the expense of courage and honesty? Living in a utopian realm will not obviate such moral dilemmas. Conversely, since these moral dilemmas inevitably arise in any rule-governed society, it is exceedingly difficult to imagine a moral utopia.

Deathlessness and Moral Improvement

Kellehear's NDErs reported that there is no death in their utopia. Since they glimpsed it only for a few hours rather than a lifetime, it is odd that they could make such an assertion with confidence. The problems with overcrowding in any finite realm of the dead stretch the credibility of their assertions. The fact that they did not encounter any funerals or rites of onward passage in their brief visions does not demonstrate that death never occurs there.

On the other hand, if it were true that there is no death in their visionary realm, then there would be little incentive for any denizen of utopia to work toward morality or self-improvement. In an infinite amount of time, whether one reaches some state of mind or being sooner or later has no temporal meaning within an eternal context. As John Hick (1976) argued, in a world where there is no death, people attempting suicide by jumping might float to the ground, the knives of murderers might turn to putty, and reasons for hygiene and nourishment disappear. Such a state might be theoretically imaginable, but it would have devastating consequences not only for the consistency of natural laws, but for incentives for moral and spiritual growth.

This picture is further complicated by the question of when utopia-bound souls become so altruistic, cooperative, kind, self-actualizing, and spiritually humanistic. It is not clear whether any sort of embodied utopia could avoid values conflict except by a rather heavy-handed values education program at the expense of human freedom. Unfortunately, most humans, for most of their lives, are either morally unconscious or else morally conscious but incapable of acting with consistent morality, despite their best intentions. How is it that this multitude of humans who spent most of their existences on earth in search of self-protection, self-gratification, and self-aggrandizement, would come to treat others as more important and more worthy of protecting, gratifying, and aggrandizing than themselves?

This moral transformation of the human character is unquestionably desirable, but it is hard to imagine that it could happen overnight, simply based on the passing from an earthly body to a utopian one. If people retain the same levels of morality that they had during life on earth, then societies of the dead would have all the moral corruption that plagues our present world, and certainly could not be conceived of as utopian.

Alternatively, if the visionary world did enforce cooperative morality, it would come closer to Mao Zedong's China than to a free and capitalistic society: re-education camps and indoctrination programs

would be necessary to counteract lifetimes of acquisitiveness. It is possible that such things lurk behind the scenes of NDErs' visions; but consideration of the workings required for any such "utopia" would reveal it as closer to a thought-controlled nightmare than to a happy heaven—as numerous utopian novelists have pointed out.

In many ways, NDErs' visions of utopia resemble the initial romance that many tourists feel after their first day in a new city. Shown the culture and the buildings, the prosperity and the social services, the cooperation in construction and places of learning, a tourist comes away from a brief encounter with almost any society thinking it wonderful and attractive. A longer investigation into any real society reveals the labor, suffering, and sacrifice upon which it is inevitably built. If NDErs had weeks and months to explore their images of utopia, they might find either that their images included elements far from utopian, or that their utopias included factors incompatible with human freedom.

Thus, while NDErs report a realm of great morality and harmony, it is hard to imagine how such a utopian harmony could be achieved. I do not deny that they said they saw utopias of moral harmony. But what they thought they saw is incompatible with what we know about human beings. Given the conditions that a utopia would include other beings, physical and spatiotemporal limitations, and people who had been educated on this world, then the kind of heavenly harmony NDErs report would be inconceivable.

NDErs' Utopia As Morally Irrelevant

I agree with Kellehear about the value of visualizing utopian societies for the potential inspiration they provide to our daily lives. For the sake of argument, let us imagine a society in which people found no moral conflict within their own actions, they were moral with respect to others, the hierarchy gave rise to no jealousies, there were no limits on supply, and there were no death. If these problems of interpersonal and moral conflict, material limitation, spiritual self-development, and death itself were nonexistent, such a utopia would be utterly irrelevant to the ways we behave here on earth.

It is precisely because we age, sicken, and die that there is urgency to what we must do in our short span on earth. It is precisely because there is only a limited amount of oxygen, ozone, fossil fuel, rain forest, arable land, precious ores (and on and on) that humans are not only

plunged into a struggle for survival, but also recognize the need for a more cooperative and self-sustainable lifestyle.

Neither cooperation nor competition is in and of itself good or evil. Initially, development of the vast unused resources of the Americas, Australia, and Africa seemed a virtue, and competition brought people energy, wealth, and inventive genius—inevitably at the expense of the less competitive. Now, when competition threatens human health and survival, the cooperative ethic has begun to appeal. But this cooperation can only be achieved, as in China and Japan, at the expense of suppressing the geniuses and giants who might emerge from a more laissez-faire competition. Thus, the attractiveness of an ethic of cooperation depends largely on the presupposition of limitation. It would be curious if cooperation should still be the rule in utopia, if death and limitation were absent.

It is possible that from a higher spiritual standpoint, selflessness is to be preferred over selfishness, and cooperation over competition. But the problems of human societies are ultimately not what it might mean to be good in a deathless, diseaseless, unlimited society, but rather what it means to be good in a society tortured by death, disease, and limitation at every turn.

To be sure, morality and satisfaction can be achieved within such limitations. But the kind of self-sacrifice and challenges prerequisite to satisfaction under such earthly conditions would not be required in an unlimited utopia. From this perspective, the utopian vision gives us perhaps something toward which to strive, but not a model upon which to base present activity. Philosophically, we can imagine either a world with moral conflict, limitation, and death, which contradicts NDErs' idyllic utopia; or else a utopia with no death, limitation, or moral conflicts, with consequently minimal relevance to our behavior here on earth. Taken at face value, NDErs' visions are either relevant but non-utopian or utopian but irrelevant.

The Buddhist Solution

Based on my own research into Pure Land Buddhist NDEs (Becker, 1981, 1984), I suggest that if NDErs' visions are interpreted along a Mahayana Buddhist model, the difficulties in the above visions of "social-materialist eternity" can be resolved. This is because the Buddhist model would replace physical/material things with mind-generated images, moral and social rules with the search for meaning and enlightenment, and deathlessness with the passage to a disem-

bodied selfless state, or *nirvana*. Furthermore, these philosophical differences have important implications for our lives here and now.

Physical Things Versus Mental Images

The Buddhist Pure Land is purely mind-generated; it is a projection of the ideas, desires, thoughts, and presuppositions of the mind that generated it. This does not mean that it is not really experienced. On the contrary, if consciousness survives the disintegration of the corpse, then mental images, projections, and memories are all that experience *could* possibly consist of, and these would seem very real indeed to experiencers.

In this ideational, nonmaterialistic realm, anything desired or imagined vividly would be experienced by the imaginer. The Pure Land *Sutras* explain that the person who longs for a banquet experiences seeing and tasting it, the person who wishes fancy clothing and palaces experiences being so clad and housed, and the person who wishes to bathe or swim finds bodies of water of the depth and temperature desired. This view of the Pure Land "utopia" has important implications both for moral development and for life in this world.

Moral Rules Versus Search For Enlightenment

The ideational aspect of experience means that in one sense, the Buddhist Pure Land is less "societal" than the utopian society; only those whom the deceased consciousness recognizes and admits can interact on the same ideational plane. Upon entering the Pure Land, we may find ourselves quite alone, except for whatever fellow beings we have the grace and openness to allow into our plane of vision. To the extent that our vision is self-centered, other beings never even enter our vision. We may for a time enjoy simply generating projected images of the riches and banquets and sports cars we might wish for; but precisely *because* all these wishes are spontaneously and instantaneously fulfilled, they soon become meaningless.

And if we become open to communing with other beings potentially in the same plane of consciousness, desires for rank, position, and material possessions pale. Since anyone can generate anything by mere thought, the point of conspicuous consumption is eliminated. Competition for superior material goods and appearances disappears. And thoughts incompatible with the well-being of fellow con-

consciousnesses remove the appearances of those people from the level of consciousness on which we dwell, leaving us humbled and very much alone. The desire to see other people can only be consummated by communing with other minds, which presupposes a selfless receptivity and desire to understand the consciousness of others.

Thus even the least moral or spiritually motivated souls in the Pure Land would soon find that mere images lose their appeal. After enjoying the fruits of our subconscious desire-projections and subsequently interacting with other consciousnesses whom we admitted, we would soon be left with the question of what existence in the Pure Land realm of postmortem consciousness is all about. And we would come to the Buddhist answer: to overcome all vestiges of self-consciousness, to achieve true selflessness, or *nirvana*.

On earth, moral rules and social restrictions derive from the necessity of living in a world of limitations where our acts may injure or limit others. On earth, materiality and society are primary, and social or moral rules are the inescapable consequences of these conditions. In the Pure Land, however, consciousness exists in a realm "purified" of matter. All dealings with others presuppose a concern or altruistic love as a prerequisite to interaction. Without such a state of mind, others cannot even share our sphere of perception.

Morality is not the result of social rules, but the internal state of sensitivity to other minds that makes telepathic communication possible. Only after self-consciousness is subordinated, so we can recognize the essential being of others' consciousnesses, is social interaction achieved. Thus, in the Pure Land, morality is primary and essential, and social interaction a result. This morality is based on our own moral self-purification and understanding, not on rules or external codes.

Deathlessness Versus Selflessness

The transition from the Pure Land to *nirvana* could be considered the death of the person; for it is the disintegration of the last vestiges of discrete personal consciousness and the merging into an indescribable state of universal consciousness transcending individual selfhood. Some Western readers might abhor this ultimate death and elimination of personality. Indeed, as long as Pure Land dwellers desire to imagine and project an embodied existence, they are doomed to do so.

From the Buddhist perspective, it is fortunate that consciousness is not doomed to a quasi-material body for eternity, as Kellehear's NDErs report. Rather, transcendence of self is the ultimate "salvation" in

Buddhism, and depends on the genuine dedication of consciousness to that goal. This death of personality and enlightenment into Ultimate Reality is a welcome alternative to eternal embodiment and spatiotemporality, but it will not be reached until the individual comes to that stage of realization.

Implications For Earthly Life

This vision of the Pure Land has important implications for our lives here and now. First, the ultimate agent of all activity is human consciousness, not money, fame, resources, nor the physical body with which we are presently equipped and burdened. The more we become entranced by sensualism and materialism, the more difficult will be our postmortem progress to a more enlightened state of consciousness. Conversely, if we live either a Buddhist or an Epicurean asceticism, we would be better prepared to control our desire-projections and closer to achieving selfless *nirvana*. We should strive to be more receptive and appreciative of others' feelings and consciousness than to outdo them.

Second, we are shown that consciousness is the author of experience. Consciousness may not influence the material world as much as it is said to influence the ideational world of the Pure Land; but it is obvious that our appreciation of beauty and sensitivity to pain are subject to the openness of our consciousness to those experiences.

The power of positive imaging in improving health and relationships is becoming increasingly recognized even by the heavily materialistic Western world. Buddhists would add that practice in meditation and image control, especially if done not for self-benefit but for self-transcendence, opens the way to clairvoyance, telepathy, precognition, and psychokinesis. These powers are not yet understood by Western paradigms that subordinate the roles of consciousness, but there is a growing research literature on these potentials.

Third, awareness that there is not only a death of the body but ultimately a transcendence of individuality is not only a solace but a spur to individual spiritual growth. Pure Land Buddhists hope to learn more of morality, but not through following the rules of a future society, nor through an automatic moral awakening upon death; they are inescapably and individually responsible for each step in the evolution from animal consciousness to a potentially transcendent human one over millions of years.

If Pure Land Buddhists use their minds badly on this level and fall back into rebirth as a human or animal rather than reaching the Pure

Land at death, then they will be subject to all the physical ills and heartaches to which the flesh is heir. On the other hand, if they awaken to the truth that everything on earth is bound up with change, decay, and suffering, they will endeavor not only to transcend selfish perspectives, but to work compassionately for the alleviation of pain of present and future generations on earth. This includes killing as few living things as possible, respecting the important role of all beings in the balance of nature, and transcending personal desires. These ideals clearly provide the basis for a more humane and environmentally conscious world.

None of this addresses whether the Pure Land is "real" or imaginary; for like it or not, imagination may be all we have left after bodily death. My purpose, and Kellehear's, was to derive meaning from NDE visions and to imagine postmortem utopias. Some of the best minds of Asia over several millenia have devoted lifetimes to achieving, understanding, and interpreting such visionary experiences. Their visions of a postmortem Pure Land have greater credibility and coherence—and consistency with what we know about humankind and nature—than the utopias of J.C. Davis and Craig Lundahl's NDErs.

The Pure Land philosophy has important implications for selflessness and self-transcendence here and now. Pure Land Buddhists believe that their ideation-centered interpretation, coupled with a realization not only of the continuity of consciousness after physical death, but of the transience and relative unimportance of personal self in this death-doomed world, gives a consistent ontological and axiological perspective on which to work towards a more utopian life, whether here and now, or in some vision of a realm beyond death.

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"Being One with God Is Something That Can Be Done Without Rules": Commentary on Allan Kellehear's "Near-Death Experiences and the Pursuit of the Ideal Society"

Patricia S. Weibust, Ph.D.
University of Connecticut

ABSTRACT: Allan Kellehear's article is a pioneering venture exploring features of the transcendent society and comparing it with J.C. Davis's typology of ideal societies. Kellehear assumed that in the life after life there is a sociocultural ordering that can be discussed via structural functional theory and concepts; and he also assumed internal and external validity, despite evidence to the contrary in his article. I think both of these assumptions are incorrect. What we need are alternative sociocultural frameworks and alternative research strategies, possibly from the "new science."

Allan Kellehear's article, "Near-Death Experiences and the Pursuit of the Ideal Society," is a fascinating sociological adventure exploring features of the "transcendent society," the sociocultural system encountered by near-death experiencers (NDErs), and comparing it with J.C. Davis's typology of ideal societies. But I think anyone reading that text would be astounded by the paucity of data. It appeared that an 8-page article by Craig Lundahl (1981-82) on the NDEs of nine Mormons supplied the sociological description, while the material culture and values were culled from a slightly less limited literature. Nev-

Patricia S. Weibust, Ph.D., is Professor of Education at the University of Connecticut. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Weibust at the Department of Educational Leadership, School of Education, U-93, University of Connecticut, 249 Glenbrook Road, Storrs, CT 06269-2093.

ertheless, as I understand it, this truly was a pioneering venture, and in that spirit I found this paper stimulating of comments, suggestions, and questions.

The article contained a number of interrelated assumptions that in the life after life there would be a sociocultural order/ordering that could be discussed by theory and/or concepts currently in vogue in our social sciences. I would prefer to raise these as questions rather than assumptions. One NDEr, reflecting upon her experience and its relationship to organized religion, said, "From my brief encounter, I got the idea that being one with God is something that can be done without rules" (Morse and Perry, 1990, pp. 145-146).

The nine Mormons Lundahl investigated apparently were the only ones to observe social organization of the genre discussed by Kellehear. Most NDErs, many of whom have had very deep experiences, reported no sociological information. I do not believe in playing the numbers game in research, but I think it is reasonable to ask if it is possible that the transcendent society was not a society, at least as we commonly know it, with no social organization, no norms, no institutions.

Accepting the assumption that there is some sort of sociocultural ordering, Kellehear used an amorphous structural-functional framework defined neither etically nor emically. He may have been reluctant to impose etic definitions, which stance I would applaud; but then he should have supplied direct quotes, "thick description," from informants so that grounded conceptualizations could have emerged. He did not do that either, and we are left in confusion: what is a society? what is meant by "transcendent"? what is the difference between society and culture, and what are values and their relationship to social action? and what is meant by social organization and process?

It might be helpful to discuss the transcendent society in terms of sociocultural theory and concepts that relate more to right-brain thinking, since it has been proposed that NDEs are located in that area of the brain and are anatomically associated with our unconscious desires and ability to dream (Morse and Perry, 1990). The work of British social anthropologist Victor W. Turner contained such theory and concepts, which enable us to focus on anti-structural and processual elements in sociocultural systems. By way of illustration, Turner described the concept of *communitas*:

The bonds of *communitas* are anti-structural in the sense that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential, I-thou (in Feuerbach's and Buber's sense) relationships. Com-

munitas is spontaneous, immediate, concrete—it is not shaped by norms, it is not institutionalized, it is not abstract. (1974, p. 174).

Kellehear's study raised another intriguing question: how to best address the issue of validity in NDE research. I am involved in the current movement to redefine science, and the "new science" that is emerging will certainly contain data validation procedures far beyond those currently in fashion. Positivism, which is unable to reflect upon itself, provides us with limited tools to study limited phenomena, but such a myopic view of reality may not suffice when we explore new frontiers, as we must. I am hopeful that Kellehear will rise to this challenge and respond to standard queries about validity, which I will raise here, and/or share his thinking about alternate paths to validation.

Issues regarding internal and external validity are related. Are NDErs' accounts of the sociocultural world they encountered accurate? If accurate, did they actually approach another world, or was all or part of their experience a production staged by stimulation of a particular part of the brain, symbolic thought expressing unconscious desires (Morse and Perry, 1990)? Kellehear avoided questions of internal validity; it would have been better to have specified his position, whatever it was. One can assume such validity for purposes of this study, and/or state that at present validity is impossible to establish, or offer another way to establish it. Research that ignores these issues could appear naive.

Kellehear mentioned the question of external validity, but seemed to contradict himself and overlooked a powerful threat that also related to internal validity. He assumed that characteristics of the transcendent society were generalizable to everyone and not unique to an individual, a social group, or a culture—a markedly tenuous position. Kellehear himself described material and sociocultural differences by citing the villages and song and dance activities reported by Melanesian NDErs; but he only offered the possibilities that there were other societies or communities within the transcendent society.

Another possibility is that NDEs are somehow interconnected with experiences here on earth. It is very clear that individual, social, and cultural backgrounds of informants are directly linked to what they report from their NDEs. To cite one example, Melvin Morse and Paul Perry (1990) related the predeath visions of a 13-year-old boy, who stated: "In them, there are lots of people in the room. God is here too. He is in control, but sometimes he lets me be in control with him" (p.

60). Incidentally, Morse's work indicated that predeath visions were the same as NDEs, which confirmed Marie-Louise von Franz's findings (1987). A second example is an account of a woman judged by Kenneth Ring (1980) to have had the deepest experience of any respondent in his study:

"Then, suddenly, I saw my mother, who had died about nine years ago. And she was sitting—she always used to sit in her rocker, you know—she was smiling and she just sat there looking at me and she [spoke] to me in Hungarian [the language her mother had used while alive]. . . . All I could see was marble; it was marble. It *looked* like marble, but it was *very beautiful*. And I could hear beautiful music; I can't tell you what kind, because I never heard anything like it before." (p. 63)

While the material culture and social specifics Kellehear mentioned, like moral stratification and restraint of problem groups, seemed to me no more generalizable than everyone speaking Hungarian or letting adolescents share control with God (is this Heaven???), I think he could have made a case for the "Mormon transcendent society." Another tack to take might have been to concentrate on what seemed to be universal social values in NDErs' reports, such as unconditional love, learning, and service.

Kellehear's comparison of the transcendent society with Davis's typology of ideal societies was a worthwhile exercise in that it highlighted our need to know more about social aspects of the NDE. The most glaring problem continues to be that he treated his "society" as if it were universal; he wrote that "these images do not arise from any one social group" (p. 92). Perhaps I am being overcritical, but Kellehear would have to tell readers who besides the nine Mormons saw these particular sociological phenomena.

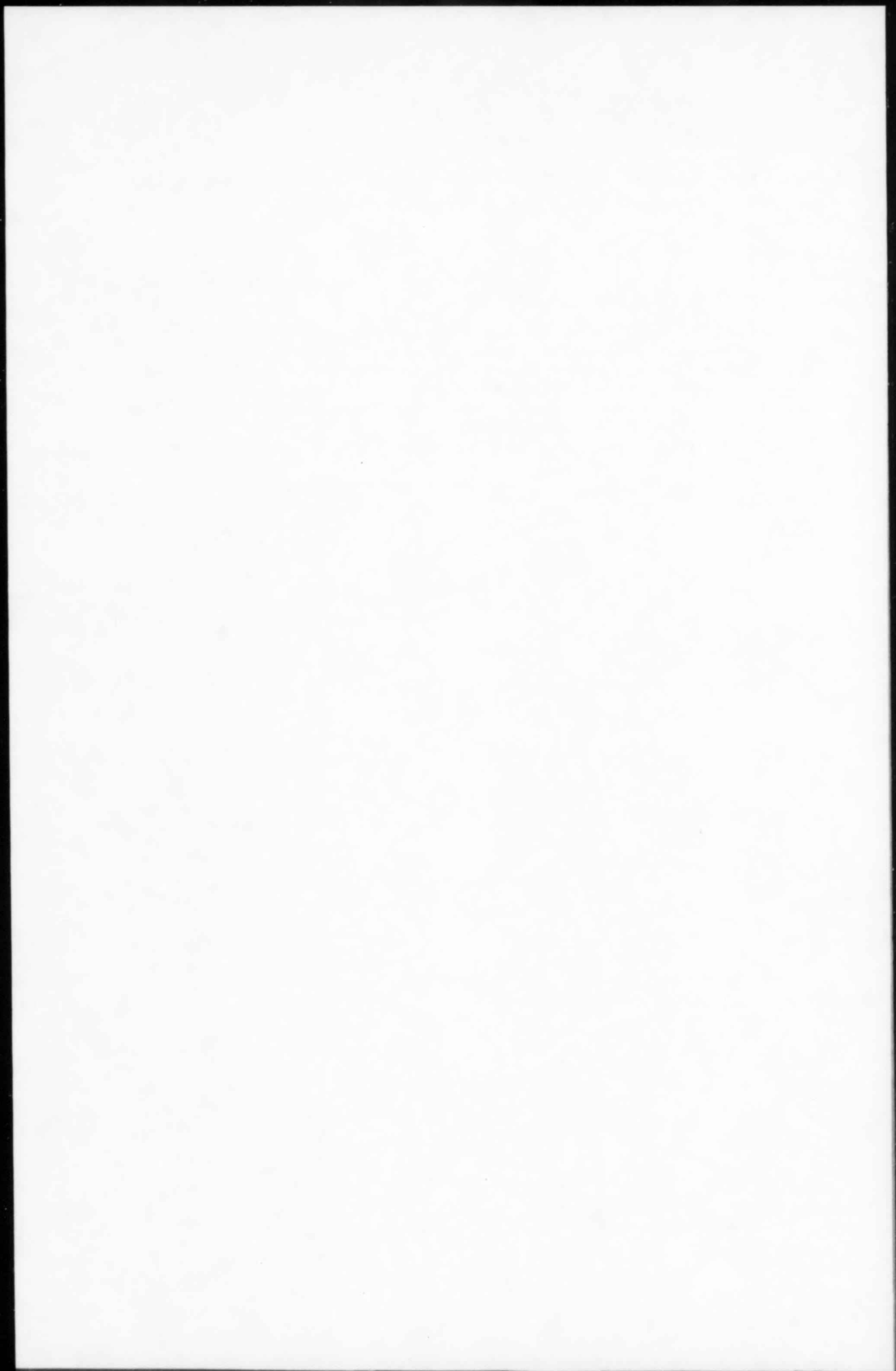
He concluded that the transcendent society was a unique type of ideal society. I agree, but for a different reason. It was unique because there were no universal sociological features reported. This may have been because we need to expand our conceptualization of social life in the life after life. Or it may have been because these visions were only *near-death*, and many people experienced specific boundaries beyond which they could not or did not go; maybe what they saw was a transitional state and not the society itself.

I would conclude this commentary by expressing my appreciation for Kellehear's effort in attempting this formidable task. He has led a scouting expedition. While those of us in our armchairs can discuss it, his work more than anything was a call for many further expeditions,

ideally provisioned with redefinitions of sociocultural phenomena and of scientific research itself.

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Commentary on Allan Kellehear's "Near-Death Experiences and the Pursuit of the Ideal Society"

Antonia Mills, Ph.D.
University of Virginia

ABSTRACT: Allan Kellehear's article raised four questions for me: (1) whether the near-death experience (NDE) presents enough data about the nature of a transcendent society for it to be a useful model for earthly societies; (2) the degree to which transcendent societies have to address the practical considerations of a material society; (3) whether NDEs are projections of experiencers' cultural concepts about the nature of the transcendent realm(s); and (4) the kind of hope offered by the growing awareness of the features of Western NDEs. I address these questions by referring to transcendent realm concepts and NDEs in the anthropological literature, particularly that of the North American Indian Prophet Movement.

In his article "Near-Death Experiences and the Pursuit of the Ideal Society" Allan Kellehear compared various Western concepts of utopia with the social order experienced in a transcendent realm by modern, mostly Western people who have come near death and had a near-death experience (NDE). He concluded that the social order portrayed in near-death experiences offers a glimmer of hope for establishing a better society on earth.

I would like to comment on a number of questions that Kellehear's paper raised: first, the extent to which NDEs give a clear concept of a transcendent *society* (with the emphasis on society); second, the rela-

Antonia Mills, Ph.D., is Research Assistant Professor in the Division of Personality Studies and Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Virginia. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Mills at the Division of Personality Studies, Box 152, Health Sciences Center, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22908.

tion of utopian concepts to concepts of heaven (are utopias supposed to be "heaven on earth"?); third, the related question of the degree to which NDEs reflect the concepts of the experiencer's culture about the nature of a transcendent realm (whether portrayed as a single or variegated afterworld, or dichotomized into heaven and hell); and finally, I would like to comment upon the kind of hope that NDEs do present.

To What Extent Do NDEs Portray a Transcendent Society?

As a sociologist, Kellehear was particularly interested in the concepts of society embodied in NDEs. However, he himself noted that Michael Sabom (1982) and others (Owens, Cook, and Stevenson, 1990) have found that not all recorded NDEs include an experience of going to another realm. In about 30 percent of Sabom's sample of Western NDEs the experiencer had an out-of-body experience (OBE), what Sabom called an autoscopic experience, in which he or she saw his or her body from the vantage point of being outside it, but did not have the experience of going on to another realm. Of the NDEs that did, the experience was typically of meeting a messenger/guide/religious figure/being of light and/or deceased relatives. Sometimes the setting in which these meetings took place could be construed as being in a transcendent society but, as Kellehear noted, often these meetings took place in sylvan settings, or in nebulous places such as clouds. Such transcendent NDEs do not tell us much about the nature of a transcendent *society* per se.

Furthermore, a characteristic feature of NDEs is reaching a barrier beyond which one cannot go; for if one did, one could not come back. Therefore the near-death experiencer is not in a position to portray what the society (or absence of society) on the other side of that barrier might be like. One would not expect travelers who only came into foreign airports or landing strips, were met by a welcoming committee, and then sent back, to tell us much about the qualities and characteristics of the societies behind the airports and landing strips. The same applies to NDEs. Indeed, if a graduate student was intending to write a thesis on the nature of various societies, Western and nonWestern, on the basis of visits to those societies, and found him- or herself prevented from getting past the welcoming committee at the airport or landing strip, one would expect the student to change the topic of the thesis. One can legitimately wonder whether NDEs provide enough of

a picture of a transcendent *society* to warrant trying to flesh out the features of such a society on the basis of NDEs alone. However, those who have transcendent NDEs often describe an overwhelming sense of understanding and intense feelings of love and connectedness, which they strive to implement in their lives after their return. I return below to the question of how society in the sense of social relationships may be altered by our knowledge of NDEs.

The Relation of Utopias to Concepts of Heaven

Kellehear, citing J.C. Davis (1984), noted that there are a variety of different types of utopian societies Western thinkers have constructed, and then asked which type of utopian society most closely corresponded to the features of the transcendent realm as depicted in NDEs. For the reasons given above, I am not sure that NDEs tell us much about the nature of the society that can be presumed to lie beyond the threshold the near-death experiencer has reached. If they did, what relevance would that have to their correspondence to the various types of utopias that have been mentally constructed? Was Kellehear implying that utopian concepts reflect concepts of the nature of a transcendent world? Or vice versa?

As a psychological anthropologist, I would like to point out that all (or almost all) societies have a concept of a transcendent world or worlds, but not all societies develop utopian concepts. Since utopian concepts typically embody concepts of governance of society, it is state societies that typically create utopias. Indeed, many utopias yearn for the simplicity and egalitarian conditions perceived in the societies of the noble savage.

Geoffrey Parrinder (1956) and Gananath Obeyesekere (1980) have noted that most tribal (or non-state) peoples portray the transcendent realm as a single society that closely resembles their earthly society. They view their own society and world as desirable and expect to return to it after a sojourn in a transcendent or otherworldly realm. Parrinder called these tribal societies "life-affirming," in contrast to Hindu, Buddhist, Judeo-Christian and Moslem societies, in which the goal is to attain some form of other-worldly salvation, with or without the benefit of repeated earthly lives in which to reach perfection. In most non-state societies one does not expect to be judged in the transcendent realm (or in one's future life back on earth) on the basis of one's performance in the previous life. By contrast, the major world

religions portray the afterworld as divided into one or more realms of heavenly reward or hellish punishment.

All the utopias with which Kellehear dealt were Western concepts of utopia. One useful classification of (Western) utopias distinguishes between attempts to present an idealized blueprint of an ideal or more perfect society that admittedly exists nowhere (the etymology of the word utopia indeed means "no where"), and practical or experimental utopias. The transcendent world, by contrast, is typically believed to exist somewhere, or elsewhere, and indeed to be real, perhaps the reality from which the shadow world we take for real comes. Utopias, then, can exist in a mental, abstract plane, or be practical, intentional attempts to establish a society that offers better conditions than the contemporary society.

Both the theoretical and the applied utopian models for society are conceived as improvements on the social conditions in the author's existing society, and both consider how to meet the members' material needs of food, shelter, clothing. By contrast, in most societies' concepts of a transcendent or heavenly society, bodies are considered more ethereal, and earthly needs are portrayed as automatically fulfilled; one need only think of the desired food and it appears, or, to use a Beaver Indian example, think of the raiment one wants to wear (and indeed the form of the "physical" body one wants to have) in order to take on that form and clothing.

Thus in many depictions of the "Happy Hunting Ground," a common North American concept of the world one goes to after death, people may sport at hunting, but the game is always plentiful and one's wish for meat fulfilled. This obviously contrasts to conditions on earth (Beaver Indian men were successful in only one out of four times they went to hunt, during a period of a year in which Robin Ridington and I tabulated their efforts and success). In other words, the conditions of life in earthly utopias are quite different from those depicted in many societies' concepts of a transcendent afterworld.

The most well known of the Greek utopias, Plato's *Republic*, was certainly not based on the older Greek Olympian or Stygian transcendent worlds. Many early Greek utopias were based on the myth of Atlantis, a lost but earthly continent. Most modern Western utopian constructs, from Thomas More's in 1516 on, have been created in response to the discovery of a brave new earthly world, stimulated by the concept that a vast and virgin territory, often depicted as "a sylvan paradise," was waiting for the establishment of a more perfect society. From the first Pilgrims who came to North America to the present, the

New World has continued to be the site of many intentional attempts to found a society or subsociety on the basis of freedom from some form of societal oppression in the societies of Europe. Again, such utopias were seldom based on concepts of the nature of heavenly worlds.

The irony is that Europeans establishing such utopian societies in the New World with few exceptions gave themselves the freedom to disregard the fact that the American continents were already populated with native societies that wanted to remain living in the same sylvan setting. The natives of North America responded to the invasion of their territory by Europeans (in part) by a series of Prophet Movements in which the religious leader would apparently die, then revive, and upon revival instruct his society from the vantage of the illumination he had received in a transcendent realm—in other words, from an NDE (Mills, 1982). These NDEs of native religious leaders typically included visions of the future, a feature that Kenneth Ring (1984) has noted as occurring in a small subsample of Western NDEs.

After the decimation of the buffalo from the plains and the spread of European disease, numerous North American Indian societies adopted the Ghost Dance (into which the Prophet Dance had evolved). The Ghost Dance was designed to give not only the shamans or religious leaders, but all participants, the experience of traveling to a transcendent realm and being reunited with their deceased relatives in a land where the buffalo still roamed and there were no Europeans (Mills 1982; Mooney 1896/1965). The Ghost Dance, then, produced group NDEs. The experience was so vivid to the practitioners that they hoped that if they practiced it fervently and frequently enough they would be able to bring about a transformation of this earth into the transcendent realm experienced while in trance. We all know the sad story of the white authorities' misunderstanding of this poignant group native NDE: fearing that the Indians meant to achieve a land without whites by massacring them, they outlawed the dance, and when they found the Sioux still practicing it, the United States Militia responded with the Massacre at Wounded Knee. Thus they transformed the NDE into a true death experience.

A further irony was contained in the fact that Frederick Engels (1902) established his outline for a society with less oppression of the masses or of laborers on the basis of Lewis Morgan's (1877/1971) portrayal of primitive communism, which Morgan (1851/1901) drew from his observations of the Iroquois, one of the first North American groups to be missionized and one of the first to respond with a prophet movement.

The Relation of NDEs to Cultural Expectation of the Nature of a Transcendent Realm

One of the questions touched upon by Kellehear but so far not adequately studied is the relation between cultural expectation of the afterworld state and the experience of it by people who come close to death, or apparently die and then revive. Kellehear noted that in Dorothy Counts' (1983) accounts of Melanesian NDEs, the subjects experienced villages like the ones they knew in their society, rather than the cities described by some Western experiencers; but he did not explore the question of whether there is more to NDEs than cultural projection of expectation onto an otherworld dimension.

I have noted many NDE accounts in the ethnographic literature of North American Indians. Unfortunately, to date we do not have a systematic cataloguing of NDEs in all cultures and continents. When such a compendium is made it will be interesting to see to what extent the depiction of the transcendent world in NDEs corresponds to the society's culturally accepted concept of the afterworld. It will also be interesting to see how stable the features found in Western NDEs are in the full range of cultural contexts. I return to a few questions related to the presence or absence of specific traits in different cultures below.

One of the most significant impacts of NDEs in the West is the concept that death is not frightening. The Judeo-Christian portrayal of a heaven/hell dichotomy suggests that many, or at least "bad" or "wicked" people, go to a frightful and painful place after death where they experience eternal hellfire and damnation. As Max Weber (1958) has pointed out, the Protestant ethic was an attempt to minimize the fear of a negative judgment after death, based on the awareness that few people are saints and assured of salvation. The Western cultural expectation that many people will be found wanting and will not achieve a blissful place after death has not been supported by modern Western NDEs. On the contrary, all NDE researchers report that most Western people who have an NDE experience a sense of well-being, peace, joy, and cosmic unity (Greyson 1985; Moody 1975; Owens, Cook, and Stevenson, 1990; Ring 1984; Sabom 1982). Bruce Greyson (1981) further reported that people who attempt suicide (often construed as the ultimate cultural no-no) and who then have an NDE report just as positive experiences as people whose NDE came as a result of accidents, operations, or fatal illness. In other words, Western NDEs are not simple confirmations of cultural expectation. Is this because, as Carol Zaleski (1987) suggested, modern NDEs express a modern vision influenced by the spiritualist movement and modern physics? Is tor-

ture less prominent because torture is less condoned in the modern world than in the medieval? The transformative power of unbidden NDEs suggests that something beyond cultural projection is taking place, but further research is necessary to determine the impact of cultural construction on NDEs.

The Kind of Hope that NDEs Present

As Kellehear himself noted, the significant aspect of an NDE (at least among North American experiencers) is not the portrayal of the type of political society in a transcendent realm that could be applied to earth, but the quality of social relationships, the feeling of well-being and calm imparted there, and the striking diminution of the fear of death. A positive feeling-tone tends to characterize NDEs whether they are of the OBE or autoscopic variety or include arrival at the threshold of a transcendent realm and interaction with figures/relatives there. There is no indication that that feeling is a result of the sociological features of the transcendent society *per se*.

It is this largely positive experience of modern NDEs that has captured the imagination of this generation. However, the experience of light and beings of light that Greyson (1985) and Justine Owens, Emily Cook, and Ian Stevenson (1990) have found to typify some types of NDEs, are not universally reported. They are not a characteristic of the NDEs collected in India (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986). Owens, Stevenson, and Cook's (1990) finding that the experience of light was correlated with being medically close to death, and that subjects whose medical condition was judged less serious were less likely to have the experience of light, may suggest that the absence of the experience of light in India is an artifact of the subjects being medically in less serious condition, and/or the result of fewer of the Indian subjects being brought back from the brink of death by state-of-the-art medical technology available in the United States. Why NDEs in India do not contain more accounts of positive affect is more of a puzzle.

Perhaps one of the reasons positive affect is less noteworthy in the Indian NDEs is because the Indian attitude towards death is different to begin with. I hypothesize that in those societies in which there is a firm belief in reincarnation, there is much less fear of death than in those (Judeo-Christian and Moslem) societies in which the religion traditionally portrayed that people will either go to a heavenly reward, or be tormented in hell. I hypothesize that such a reduced fear of death will already be present in both those societies that believe in reincar-

nation and do not expect the afterworld state to be a reward or punishment for earthly demeanor (as among the tribal peoples of all continents), and in those Hindu and Buddhist societies that believe that the transcendent sojourn (like the future life) will reflect conduct in previous lives and may contain sojourns in transcendent realms that are appropriately pleasant or hellish.

Certainly the first missionaries who sought to enlighten the natives of North America noted their striking absence of fear of death (Thwaites, 1896). Missionaries also recorded experiences among their native parishioners that were very like NDEs, except that in some instances, the person did not revive in the same body, but returned to earth to be reborn as an infant. In a forthcoming book on Amerindian reincarnation beliefs (Mills and Slobodin, in press), the similarity of visionary NDEs of native Americans, such as that of Black Elk (Neihardt 1932/1961), are compared to the visionary experiences of native Americans who recount dying and being reborn in a new body, such as Thunder Cloud (Radin 1926/1983).

Interestingly, the Amerindian accounts of such experiences did not include the self-reflective reports of feelings of well-being and cosmic unity of Western NDEs, perhaps because North American Indians were not expected to be effusive about describing the emotions of visionary experience; perhaps because the recital of the vision itself was expected to convey the sense of cosmic unity and well being implicitly to the auditors.

Much more research needs to be done to understand whether the positive affect associated with NDEs, particularly with experiences of light present in some NDEs (Owens, Cook, and Stevenson, 1990), is similar to the experiences of shamans and of trance dancers, to some states of meditation, or to other altered states of consciousness. Obviously, much more research needs to be done to ascertain whether consciousness transcends physical or bodily death. Kellehear, like many writers on NDEs, avoided the question of whether NDEs present any evidence for a transcendent reality. Such questions do not lend themselves to simple answers, but they remain important, perennial questions that deserve careful study.

I suspect that NDEs have captured the imagination of the current generation because they do offer hope that such questions can be answered, and may be answered in the affirmative. We can learn something simply from the enthusiasm of the public for the accounts of NDEs. We can, I hope, also learn more about why and how NDEs are such positive and transformative experiences. Before or until these questions are better answered, what can we learn from NDEs to help

humanity? I suspect the greatest hope lies not in the blueprint for a just society contained in NDEs, but in the message that great positive affect is associated with compassionate relationships, with compassionate rather than punitive or judgmental evaluation. Perhaps if we can learn to evaluate both ourselves and others from such a compassionate vantage point we will come closer to experiencing "heaven on earth."

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A Critique of Kellehear's Transcendent Society

Howard A. Mickel, Ph.D.
La Jolla, California

ABSTRACT: Allan Kellehear argued that the otherworld society envisioned in near-death experiences (NDEs) is similar to utopian societies. However, his cultural analysis, based on 9 Mormon NDEs, did not reflect the diversity of near-death visions from other cultures. I suggest that these Mormon NDEs were neither as utopian as Kellehear assumed nor representative of contemporary NDE reports, and that a more complete analysis would reveal a variety of NDEs and otherworld visions reflecting the experiencers' sociocultural background. Robert Bellah's model of religious evolution provides a model for charting the NDE's change over time and cultures, and allows us to differentiate the perennial features of the NDE from the transient culturally-determined ones—a first step in understanding the role of NDEs in the quest for an ideal society.

Most of the scholars I know who have investigated near-death experiences (NDEs) have been enormously impressed by the way NDErs have found their lives transformed by their experiences. But all of us who are impressed by the transformative capacities of the NDE face a common threat in the university: the tyranny of epistemology. As Suzanne Langer (1957) has noted, the major philosophical problem that all thinkers have faced since the times of Descartes is the bifurcation of knowledge into inner and outer, subjective and objective. Human beings can have thoughts, ideals, visions, revelations, feelings,

Howard Mickel, Ph.D., formerly Chairman of the Department of Religion at Wichita State University, is currently Director of the Theta Project, an educational and research effort focusing on near-death and related experiences. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Mickel at 632 Sea Lane, La Jolla, CA 92037.

intuitions, but it is the scientific method that confirms what is empirically "real."

Those of us in the field of near-death studies know the frustration of sensing the importance of this transformative human experience and yet having our work discounted, dismissed, or even ridiculed because it is subjective like a dream or a hallucination, and not "real." Allan Kellehear's article will undoubtedly attract the attention of near-death researchers because he tried to bypass the "tyranny of epistemology" by not addressing the reality of NDE reports, but rather to show that the ideals found in reports of the transcendent society may reawaken the pursuit of an ideal society in our own time. This is a very important and legitimate task.

Kellehear attempted a cultural analysis of the otherworld society in NDE visions and compared it with five ideal societies. He found it came closest to the utopian society. Finally, he showed that the narratives of the transcendent society may reawaken and inspire our efforts to create an ideal society in our day. The ideals found in the NDE include harmony, order, love, cooperation, service, and learning, which may inspire us at a time when moral and social disorder are rampant and growing.

My major criticism of Kellehear's program is in the way he carried out his task; that is, I am concerned about his method. He undertook a cultural analysis of the otherworld(s) that appear in the NDE; but he never did that satisfactorily. He drew mainly on Craig Lundahl's work, which focused on a review of modern NDEs and nine selected, mostly 19-century Mormon NDEs. This is a rather narrow data base for what one would expect to be a global perspective on the NDE. Those of us in other disciplines need the historian, ethnologist, anthropologist, and sociologist to research NDEs throughout history and in other parts of the world and provide a cultural analysis that would show the similarities and differences between these NDEs.

Such an analysis, I argue, would show that there are *varieties* of NDEs around the world and not *the NDE*; it would show there are a *variety* of otherworld visions and not *the transcendent society*. This analysis would show that there are widespread similarities among NDEs around the world: persons on the brink of death journey to another world; they are accompanied by guides; they see departed loved ones; they are told they must go back; they return changed with a message for others.

But the second thing this cultural analysis would show is that the visionary perceives the otherworld in a way consistent with his or her social and cultural background. Members of the Oglala Sioux report

being transported to another world where the six grandfathers preside and the events they see are similar to what they have learned in their lifetime through story, song, and dance (Neihardt, 1961). Natives from Melanesia on the verge of death describe visiting a world that parallels their belief in the cargo cult (Counts, 1983). Visionaries from northern India report visiting an otherworld where they receive judgments from sacred and divine personages in their religious tradition (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986). Medieval Christian visions of the otherworld reflect the doctrines of the Catholic Church and its institutional and social organization (Zaleski, 1987). Mormons describe journeys to an otherworld that is consistent with Mormon doctrine, teaching, and organization (Lundahl, 1981-82).

When modern persons are near death, they report journeys to an otherworld where the assumptions of democracy, acceptance, and self-knowledge prevail, according to Carol Zaleski, because modern near-death narratives "are no more free of cultural influence than those of less pluralistic eras" (1987, p. 190). She observed that contemporary near-death researchers have missed these assumptions because they have been too immersed in their own age.

If Kellehear had provided this global perspective of the NDE, we could have seen more clearly the great variety of near-death visions of the otherworld; and then we might have seen how this global perspective could help us find an orientation in our personal lives and society. But Kellehear has focused too narrowly on two quite different types of NDE: the 19th-century Mormon NDE and the modern NDE as initially described by Raymond Moody (1975). He assumed, following Lundahl's lead, that the Mormon and the modern NDE are quite similar. He appears to have been too ready to find ideals, principles, or "messages" in the NDE that might inspire persons who face social disorder.

The selection of the Mormon NDE out of the great variety of NDEs that have occurred in history and in various cultures suited Kellehear's purpose very well, for he needed to find a strong sense of social order to stem the tide of contemporary social disorder. The Mormon Church was an ideal choice because it is arguably the most highly socially organized and efficient religious denomination in the United States. Kellehear wrote that the transcendent society is a place that "is highly organized, and conversely eschews disorder and confusion" (p. 82). Social order is a desirable ideal in the modern world; in fact, it may not be so much an ideal as a precondition for any society.

What Kellehear did not make clear, explicit, and detailed was that the Mormon vision of the otherworld was a Mormon heaven, not a modern, Moody-type vision of the otherworld. Words like "order" are

general, abstract, empty terms that seem desirable, but the "order" Mormons saw in their visions reflected the "order" that came from the revelations of their prophets and is quite different from that in a democratic society. The Mormons are a highly organized group because historically the Mormon Church grew up outside of and in contention with the United States government.

Mormons believe themselves to be following the teaching of the *Doctrine and Covenants* (1880/1979), a community of God's chosen people under an egalitarian economic order called the Law of Consecration and Stewardship. The Church organizes its affairs through the hierarchical offices of the Bishop, Deacon, Elder, Patriarch, and Apostle, and is led by a President who can speak as a divinely inspired Prophet. Up until 1890 Mormon family life was polygamous, each man having the option of several wives who were subordinate to the husband and who could not hold the office of priest.

In Mormon teaching and life the words "order," "service," and "learning" are imbedded in a far different context than the modern reader might imagine. For example, among Lundahl's Mormon cases was that of Jedidiah M. Grant, who in 1856 had a vision of the otherworld and "saw the order of righteous men and women; beheld them organized in their several grades. . . . organized in family capacities" (Lundwall, n.d., pp. 71-72, cited in Lundahl, 1981-82, p. 322). Grant saw them organized in family capacity because Mormons are married for "time and eternity"; eternal marriage is not taught by mainline Catholics and Protestants. Mormon order is based on a theocratic perspective that many modern people would consider authoritarian, chauvinistic, and inconsistent with what Robert Bellah (1964) called the modern temper: the feeling in the modern world that the individual is responsible for his or her decisions.

But Kellehear's cultural analysis did not include the cultural roots of Mormonism. He made an amalgam of the Mormon otherworld vision and the modern Moody-type otherworld visions, and out of them created "the transcendent society." But these are actually two quite different and even conflicting views of social organization. For example, Kellehear wrote that "the transcendent society is not linked to any ideology of salvation. That is, entry into that ideal form of society is not dependent on membership in any religious movement" (p. 87). That may be true for the modern vision of the otherworld, the transcendent society, and the utopian society, but it is not true of the Mormon vision of the otherworld. In his 1856 Mormon otherworld vision Grant saw no wicked spirits, but he saw families that were not permitted to live

together, because they had not honored their calling (*Journal of Discourses*, 1882/1966).

Mormons in otherworld visions are told to do ordinance work that includes baptizing deceased relatives in a Mormon temple. In Mormon teaching, progress is linked to Mormon doctrine, teaching, and ritual; this perspective is quite different from the general moral progress in the modern, Moody-type NDE. As Zaleski pointed out, modern NDE narratives are shaped by a democratic mood: they "advocate . . . an individualistic, anti-institutional, humanistic ideal" (1987, p. 190). Kellehear has presented a mixture of two quite different social organizations in the otherworld and tried to pass it off as "the transcendent society." He selected those features of NDEs that fit his transcendent society and ignored, minimized, or misrepresented many features that did not.

For example, Kellehear summarized Dorothy Counts's research on Melanesian NDEs by writing that their otherworld is a beautiful, well-ordered place: people there are "described as working, constructing buildings or participating in traditional song and dance" (p. 82). All of this fits Kellehear's beautiful transcendent society; but this is not Counts's understanding of the Melanesian otherworld:

. . . the land of the dead is perceived as a happy place. It is, however, not the pleasant garden reported by Moody (1975) and by Osis and Haraldsson (1977). Instead it is a land that is described as having factories and wage employment. It has an appearance that reminds me of the view approaching Los Angeles from the air. . . . Paradise, the land of the dead, is a place of factories, automobiles, highways, airplanes, European houses and buildings in great numbers, and manufactured goods. One man's smoggy freeway is another man's heaven! (Counts, 1983, p. 130)

The complex beliefs that shape the Melanesian vision of the otherworld are based on the cargo cult, which sees white people as spirit beings who send cargo planes filled with technological wonders from another world. A detailed socioanthropological analysis of the cargo cult would reveal how these beliefs are reflected in the Melanesian conception of the otherworld. Kellehear did not provide such a cultural analysis, but instead skimmed off what was similar to "the transcendent society" and in the process misrepresented the Melanesian vision of the otherworld.

Another case in which Kellehear ignored data that conflict with his thesis about the transcendent society involved the study of 16 NDEs

from northern India reported by Satwant Pasricha and Ian Stevenson (1986). A typical case involved an Indian who "is taken in hand by 'messengers' and brought before a man or woman who is often described as having a book or papers that he or she consults. A mistake is discovered. The wrong person has been 'sent for,' and this person is then brought back by the messengers to his or her terrestrial life" (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986, p. 167). Kellehear did not mention these Indian NDEs, perhaps because the transcendent society is a well-ordered society, while these Indian cases suggest disorder and confusion in the otherworld. However, the Indian cases are more numerous than the nine Mormon cases he used for his description of the transcendent society.

Why did Kellehear select the nine Mormon cases and Lundahl's review of modern NDEs? There are other studies that vividly describe the otherworld: native American NDEs (Neihardt, 1961), Pasricha and Stevenson's NDE cases from northern India, Zaleski's medieval Christian NDEs, the Gallup nationwide survey of modern NDEs (Gallup and Proctor, 1982), and others. It appears to me that he selected these cases because the social order and harmony seen in the Mormon otherworld vision are inspiring resources for offsetting the social disorganization and disruption in modern society. In addition, the cultural influences on the Mormon accounts are not as visible as, for example, on medieval Christian NDEs.

What Kellehear has done by compounding Mormon visions of the otherworld and modern, Moody-type NDEs is to highlight the contemporary dilemma. It is possible to have a high degree of social order and control in a closed Mormon society with divinely inspired leadership, but those rigidities are felt to be too constraining by modern persons who sense that self-responsibility is the only basis for contemporary decision-making. On the other hand, the individualistic, anti-institutional, humanistic, and accepting ideals of the modern, Moody-type NDE resonate with the democratic sense of self-responsibility; but, as Plato warned long ago they also contain the threat of mobocracy and social anarchy.

Another dilemma Kellehear faced centers on the inspiring ideals of love, harmony, and cooperation. If these ideals of the transcendent society are the same that exist in the teachings of the Mormon Church and in a social system that has endorsed the subordination of women and, historically, has had difficulty giving blacks full status as members of the Church, then they may not be adequate to provide the social renewal for which Kellehear hoped. The Roman Catholic social teach-

ing and that of prominent Protestant ethicists like Reinhold Niebuhr (1953) maintain that love is not enough in making social decisions. Love must be coupled with justice to make the deliberate, calculated policies that are required in society.

I see Kellehear's program as a quasi-religious quest characteristic of modern society. As Bellah wrote: "The search for adequate standards of action, which is at the same time a search for personal maturity and social relevance, is in itself the heart of the modern quest for salvation, if I may divest that word of dualistic association" (1964, p. 373). Kellehear's programmatic proposal to find ideals in the NDE for personal and social guidance is a modern and relevant quest for secular salvation. My criticism of his proposal is in his selection of data to identify the transcendent society and his interpretation of those data.

As I mentioned above, I believe that a global cultural analysis of NDEs in history and in various cultures would reveal a variety of NDEs and otherworld visions, and not *the* NDE or *the* transcendent society. Further, I suggest that Bellah's article on "Religious Evolution" (1964) provides a useful model for classifying the stages NDEs have gone through in history. Bellah's five evolutionary stages of religion—primitive, archaic, historic, early modern, and modern—provide a useful model for describing how NDEs change throughout history and how they reflect the social and cultural context of the NDEr.

Using Bellah's model has four advantages. First, it is based on four decades of research into the sociology of religion by an eminent American sociologist. Second, it utilizes the critical historical, Biblical, and theological research of the last 200 years. Third, the evolutionary stages in the model are not based on speculation, like those of Georg Hegel and Karl Marx, but are anchored in actual observations of what has happened to religious beliefs and organizations through history. Fourth, granted that near-death studies is a multidisciplinary field, the NDE is best seen in the context of religious studies alongside mystical experience, visionary experience, conversion, and other phenomena that have been the special province of religious studies.

With a comprehensive global perspective on the NDE, we will be able to see how the NDE evolved and developed in history and how social and cultural contexts influence the NDEr's perception of the otherworld. Then we may be able to discover which features of the NDE are perennial and which are transient. Only then will we understand what the images of the NDE have to offer in terms of resources in finding an orientation that is vital and healing.

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Near-Death Utopias: Now or Later?

Kathy Charmaz, Ph.D.

Sonoma State University

ABSTRACT: By viewing near-death experiences (NDEs) in the context of the quest for an ideal society, Kellehear offered hope for positive social change and insight into the social, rather than purely personal, meanings of the NDE. However, his approach raised issues of the interpretive research process generally. As with any research, near-death studies are influenced by investigators' questions, interests, and assumptions. Despite the reasoning behind Kellehear's position, he grounded his analysis not in the data, but rather in his typology of ideal societies. I suggest we look first for indications of ideal social order in near-death narratives, and only later compare them with types of utopias.

Allan Kellehear developed a suggestive theme in the near-death literature by relating these experiences to a quest for ideal or utopian society. His knowledge of both utopian thought and near-death experiences (NDEs) is thorough and erudite. Looking at NDEs through the prism of the quest for an ideal society, his view was both optimistic and didactic. By viewing these near-death narratives as imbedded in a pursuit for the ideal society, Kellehear offered hope for positive social change and betterment of the human condition. Further, Kellehear viewed these narratives as offering ideas about the nature of society, therefore as instructive for *social* meanings rather than purely personal illumination or spiritual knowledge. These are intriguing ideas; but do they work?

Before addressing this question, I wish to place my remarks in the larger context of doing qualitative research. A close study of Kel-

Kathy Charmaz, Ph.D., is Chairperson of the Department of Sociology at Sonoma State University. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Charmaz at the Department of Sociology, Sonoma State University, 1801 East Cotati Avenue, Rohnert Park, CA 94928.

lehear's analysis can raise a series of issues directly pertaining to researching NDEs particularly and to dilemmas and issues in interpretive research methods more generally. The ambiguity surrounding NDEs as well as the blurred distinctions between these and related experiences makes defining the parameters of study difficult (Zaleski, 1987). Further, the methods of learning about NDEs lie within the frontier between traditional science and spiritual visions, making researching them seem fraught with methodological and philosophical hazards. Those who study these experiences may themselves hold, and likely are judged by, the traditional canons of positivistic science. Certainly, the study of near-death experiences has elicited debates and doubts about both the nature of the experience and the scientific legitimacy of the research process itself.

Kellehear's analysis is a welcome break from zealous examinations of the veracity of near-death narratives and from painstaking questions about how the investigators' interests and style of questioning could have contaminated, influenced, or produced the narratives. Whether interviewers prod their respondents and pull information from them or the stories simply tumble out without pause, the stories are, at least in part, an artifact of the research process and the specific interview situation. But that doesn't necessarily make them less interesting or significant. Like *any* other research that relies on responses generated by questions, to some extent, these accounts are a product of an interaction process bounded by time, culture, and conventions of discourse. Similarly, like any other research, the final products are shaped by the investigator's guiding research questions, methodological skill and interests, personal intuitions, theoretical acumen, philosophical assumptions, and analytic proclivities.

Placing this kind of research squarely into the canons of positivism trivializes it. Nonetheless, tensions remain between positivistic goals of attempting to define the objects of study beforehand, describing them accurately, and ordering the data according to their "inherent" characteristics and phenomenological goals to get inside the experience, to capture its essence, and to give voice to those who have it. All this is further complicated by the postmodernist critiques of rendering ethnographic data and questioning the authoritative voice imposed upon the data by the researcher (Atkinson, 1990; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Schneider, 1991).

To what extent do near-death researchers impose their voice and their ideas on their data? To what extent might they distill and reify conclusions from the fleeting images and fragmented narratives that they collect? Kellehear's analysis offered an interpretive rendering of

transcendent experiences; but might he not have veered in the direction of over-interpretation? However useful his claims of utopian societies are because they move the literature away from dreary debates about veracity, might they not have been overdrawn? Perhaps. Kellehear did move the discussion beyond descriptive types into the realm of meaning and ideas. Moreover, his interpretations may have rested on solid evidence and careful reasoning. However, Kellehear did not ground his analysis systematically in his data, which I gather here primarily consisted of a secondary analysis of near-death research. Nor did he take his reader through the analytic steps that he employed. Rather, he reviewed the social and political characteristics of types of ideal societies and their respective applicability to near-death experiences. I propose doing just the opposite. Why not examine the near-death narratives first for indications of ideal social *order*, not merely fleeting images, including those of social and political life? After providing solid evidence of ideal social orders, one could distinguish between those narratives that reveal them, those that offer fleeting images, and those that provide neither. Further, why not start with the implicit and explicit meanings within the narratives themselves rather than directly applying a typology of ideal societies upon them? In doing so, the researcher could give greater voice to the authors of the narratives rather than assuming authority over them. After presenting, developing, and analyzing their stories, the researcher could then compare them with ideal types of utopias.

Kellehear did draw upon descriptions of the narratives Craig Lundahl (1981-82) collected for developing his ideas about transcendent societies that go beyond transcendent visions or images. Lundahl pointed out that his nine selected accounts were unusual in the length, and consequently the detail, of the reported near-death experiences. That typical brevity, which Kellehear noted, made the analytic jump between transcendent visions and utopian societies problematic. Although Lundahl's narratives may have been more complete than most, Kellehear must have found substantial evidence of similar themes in the other accounts that he mentioned. It would have helped if he had traced these connections explicitly for his reader; we could then better assess his evidence and his reasoning.

What these experiences might mean and how to render the subsequent stories analytically are both intriguing and perplexing issues, sometimes to people who have them as well as to their research analysts. The stories are recounted narratives written in memory and retold as significant events. As such, they are imbedded in consciousness and shape meaning—whether related as given, as emergent, or as

ambiguous (Charmaz, 1991). With any retold story, the views of the past are selective, told from the vantagepoint of the present. Hence, what happened between past and present colors and shapes the interpretations of the past. Conversely, images from the past shade present experience. If as social beings we draw upon socially acquired knowledge to understand our experience, it is not surprising that people relate transcendent visions to familiar objects and ideals. Emile Durkheim (1913) pointed out long ago that human beings took the idealized structure of their own society as the structure of heaven.

To me, the move from transcendent utopian visions in the narratives to relatively well-articulated utopian societies seems somewhat overdrawn and forced. Of course, Kellehear may have intended to overstate his case to make his point. However, in its present form, this comparison of images of society found in near-death narratives with utopian societies takes a visionary image and reifies it into a *society*. Although instructive as one way of viewing these experiences, I do not find Kellehear's argument to be wholly convincing as he articulated it at this time. Nonetheless, the fresh view he offered in looking at these narratives is welcome. Further, the analytic agenda I have laid out surely exceeds what could reasonably be accomplished in one short article. But I hope Kellehear pursues it. In the meantime, he has provided us with a provocative and creative beginning. And to quote Kellehear's ending remark: "That may just be enough."

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Glimpses of Utopia Near Death? A Rejoinder

Allan Kellehear, Ph.D.
La Trobe University

ABSTRACT: Five scholars have offered comments, suggestions, and criticisms of my paper "Near-Death Experiences and Pursuit of the Ideal Society." In this rejoinder, I reply to those comments and elaborate on aspects of my earlier paper. I discuss issues of methodology, epistemology, validity, logic, and other social considerations with respect to the plausibility of viewing some near-death imagery as utopian. I conclude with some reflections on the social character and study of the near-death experience.

Raymond Moody (1988) and William Serdahely (1989) have both recently asked why near-death experiences (NDEs) intrigue us. Their answers point to spiritual perspectives, focusing as they do on the issue of personal survival of death. One of my aims in the essay "Near-Death Experiences and the Pursuit of the Ideal Society" was to develop a sociological answer to this question. My attempt was not aimed at rivaling the spiritual answers; rather it was based on the recognition that social influences may play a certain role in explaining the popular attraction of the NDE. NDEs are intrinsically tied to issues of personal and social identity; but those issues are not fully explained by analyzing the NDE as a physical or psychological crisis. There are *social* images in the NDE and some of these seem to have organizational features. Might these images play a role in the task of personal and social change?

Some of the problems with my argument had to do with problems

Allan Kellehear, Ph.D., is a Lecturer in the Department of Sociology at La Trobe University. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Kellehear at the Department of Sociology, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria 3083, Australia.

that concern all near-death studies: their methods, their paucity of data, and the early, sometimes unsure development of enabling and useful theoretical frameworks. In this vein, I agree or am in sympathy with a good many of the reservations of my commentators. With other comments, I find that I am not in agreement, but space considerations restrict me to addressing only the main objections.

Carl Becker's characteristically thoughtful and provocative critique adopted three methodological approaches. First, Becker set about demonstrating the irrational worth of broad social values that may conflict with each other in practice. Positive social values implicit in the NDE are "motherhood" statements, statements whose characteristic lack of precision renders them "morally irrelevant." Becker felt that if he demonstrated how illogical and contradictory those values and images were, that somehow that would disqualify them from being viewed as utopian. That method should allow Becker to dismiss most, if not all, utopian writings, for few could survive such a technical review.

The problem with Becker's methodology in that instance was that the perceived worth or attraction of utopian images does not stem from their practical workability. Rather, utopian writings or ideas *inspire* people to practical experiment. It has quite often been true that those experiments have not worked out, but that did not lessen the attraction or make them less utopian in design. Just as importantly, this impractical side of utopian ideas does not lessen their potency in prompting social and personal change. I argue that this attraction is a factor in explaining the popularity of near-death imagery, logical and moral problems notwithstanding.

The second method Becker employed was to suggest a deterministic model of human nature: people are self-protecting, self-gratifying, and self-aggrandizing, and that pattern of relating plays no small part in the shaping of cultures. Becker could not accept that simply arriving at another culture could be critical to changing this incorrigible nature of humanity. I reject that culture-bound and essentialist notion of human behavior. Apart from broad genetic aspects of endowment, people are made social by their respective cultures. The social experiences one encounters by virtue of one's location in geography, society, and history contribute to the shape and priority of one's social and moral values.

By summarizing what is essentially an epistemological assumption of anthropological and sociological analysis, I am not dismissing individual differences. Nor am I arguing for a view of human nature that is infinitely and arbitrarily changeable. I am, however, stressing that if one accepts that culture and social organizations play major roles in

changing people, then that socialization process should continue its realization in the transcendent society.

Becker's third method of critique was to argue for the importance of death and limitation as incentives for moral and social development. Once again, according to Becker, utopias that jettison death do so at the risk of becoming morally irrelevant. This is because without the finiteness and urgency that death imposes on life there would be little incentive for major moral development. However, a review of the gerontological literature might convince Becker that there are worse things in the world than death.

Many old people would argue that isolation or dependency are worse than death; Mahatma Gandhi argued that poverty is worse than death; and until quite recently, quite a few East Germans argued that deprivation of freedom was worse than death. In many aboriginal societies, death is not surrounded by the bourgeois sentiment known only recently in the Western world (Aries, 1981). In those societies, death is viewed much as another type of life; and yet moral and social development occurs in those societies, as indeed they do in the old, the poor, and the imprisoned.

Few people who desire social and personal betterment do so because of the knowledge that they will die. People embrace various ideas about fairness, kindness, comfort, or tolerance because for many people those ideas create safety, stability, and dignity for themselves and those for whom they care. Sometimes, for some people, these values have meant self-sacrifice and death. But it is these values and their affirming functions to which death itself is subordinated, and not the reverse. I agree that historically this has meant more conflict than harmony. But that only reinforces my view that death, however wasteful as we see it, is after all a rather ordinary and pedestrian incentive for moral and social development.

The "mind-generated" model Becker proposed reflected once again his essentialist notion of self: the mind, presumably an asocial agency, will generate a world without moral and social rules because its search will be for "meaning" and "enlightenment." This proposal places an artificial, nonrelational division between mind and culture. What cognitive materials would a mind use to construct a world in that state? What models would it employ and where will those models come from, if not from its previous social or societal experience?

Patricia Weibust raised a very interesting issue that I found quite challenging also. She asked whether we might treat the sociological issues of order, control, and change as questions, and whether our current social concepts needed revision in analyzing the transcendent

society. I agree with her suggestions. The method Kathy Charmaz suggested in her commentary offered a starting point for this approach. Examining the narratives for explicit and implicit meanings and inductively developing the symbols and categories from those meanings would be a creative approach. The "structural-functional" appearance of my own analysis stemmed from the narratives described by Craig Lundahl (1981-82), George Gallup and William Proctor (1982), and B. Elder (1987). The presence of conflict and disorder was minimal in those accounts and, although that did arouse my sociological suspicions, I took the view that that functional and projected view probably enhanced the attractiveness of near-death imagery for many people.

The issue of validity I deliberately left unaddressed. I do believe that for this first analysis, at this stage, it was not relevant or necessary to deal with that question. Whether the images recounted by NDErs originate from their brains alone or from some empirical reality does not alter the content features of the imagery. And it is this image content that interests me and many others around the world. I will address the emic/etic issue further below.

Howard Mickel believed I wrote about the transcendent society as if there were no variations or cultural diversity in that area. I can only say here that that was simply untrue. I advise that he re-read that section of my essay in which I did acknowledge other societies and I made particular mention of Chinese, Melanesian, and Indian ones. In that connection, I specifically mentioned the work of Satwant Pasricha and Ian Stevenson (1986), work that Mickel alleged I omitted.

In general, however, with regard to culture-specific features of the NDE, Mickel and I do not disagree. His comments broadly corresponded to my own conclusions in that area. Nevertheless, cultures that produce bows and arrows are not necessarily any less attracted to the values of order, education, and human service than other cultures that produce cities and libraries. Mickel's complaint that Indian cases of mistaken identity revealed flaws in the well-organized workings of transcendent societies was really a criticism of quality rather than substance. The fact that some utopias look less than ideal does not disqualify them from being utopian. That is because, as I have said, the criteria for utopian societies lie in their organizational approach to the problem of social and moral development, and *not* solely in any successful portrayal of perfection.

Mickel also wrote that I misrepresented Melanesian NDEs and, to support that claim, produced part of a Melanesian account I omitted. I

did "ignore" that part of Dorothy Counts' (1983) work, because she herself classified that narrative as a Melanesian *dream*, not an NDE. My analysis did not include utopian imagery in dreams. I had also not sought to analyze the "cultural roots of Mormonism" because I had not analyzed any NDE account from Lundahl that was not consistent with those from Gallup, Elder, or Moody. As Lundahl argued in his original paper (1981-82), the accounts themselves were consistent with the piecemeal accounts from the near-death literature.

I do not agree that NDEs are the "special province" of religious studies, or any other discipline for that matter. Arguments about intellectual territory are usually covert ideological ones and in that sense spurious. Mickel referred to "Kellehear's program" as a "quasi-religious quest." I have no program and my intellectual intention, if that was what was meant, was certainly not "quasi-religious." Concepts of death are social. NDEs occur in society and one important way of analyzing them is to adopt a social way of seeing and examining them. My aim, therefore, was to suggest one further reason, beyond the simple one of being attracted to the prospect of survival, that might account for the popular interest in NDEs.

In this context, Antonia Mills suggested that it is the feelings and the calmness of the NDE that capture the popular imagination more than the social images. I agree that those are indeed a contributing factor. I would add the qualification that feelings are about something, and that something is usually environmental. Feelings occur in contexts of some sort, and those contexts are sometimes described by NDErs in some detail. I also agree that the concept of utopia applies mainly in state societies, and is therefore a notion that is culture-bound. Nevertheless, Westerners' interpretation of these social images, whatever their source, may be utopian, because that is a ready way for them to handle societal images. I readily acknowledge the limits of this comment for nonWestern NDErs and nonNDErs.

Charmaz wrote that I gave an interpretive rendering of the transcendent society, but one not well grounded in the data. This echoed Weibust's remarks concerning the emic/etic dilemmas in social research. There can be no doubt that an important part of understanding the social is to attempt to appreciate experience from the experiencer's point of view, that is, phenomenologically. On the other hand, that view itself is limited by the social positions of the various experiencers. Outsiders' interpretations, historical and social theories, have been developed to interpret beyond the individual's experiences so as to relate the different orbits of social life to one another. The task of

"making sense" is more than simply adding the sum of all individual experiences. Unfortunately, outsiders' interpretations frequently suffer from problems of validity, as Weibust rightly noted.

In my essay, I was concerned not only about NDErs but just as importantly about how nonNDErs might make sense of social images derived from the NDE. I chose mainly Western NDE literature because the popular and media interest in the NDE to date has been Western. In this sense, I wrote and reflected not simply as a sociologist, but also as a thinking and reflecting nonNDEr who was part of that popular and widespread interest. In a methodological sense, then, part of the emic is the nonNDEr perspective, and I wrote from that *verstehen* as much as from a particular sociological one.

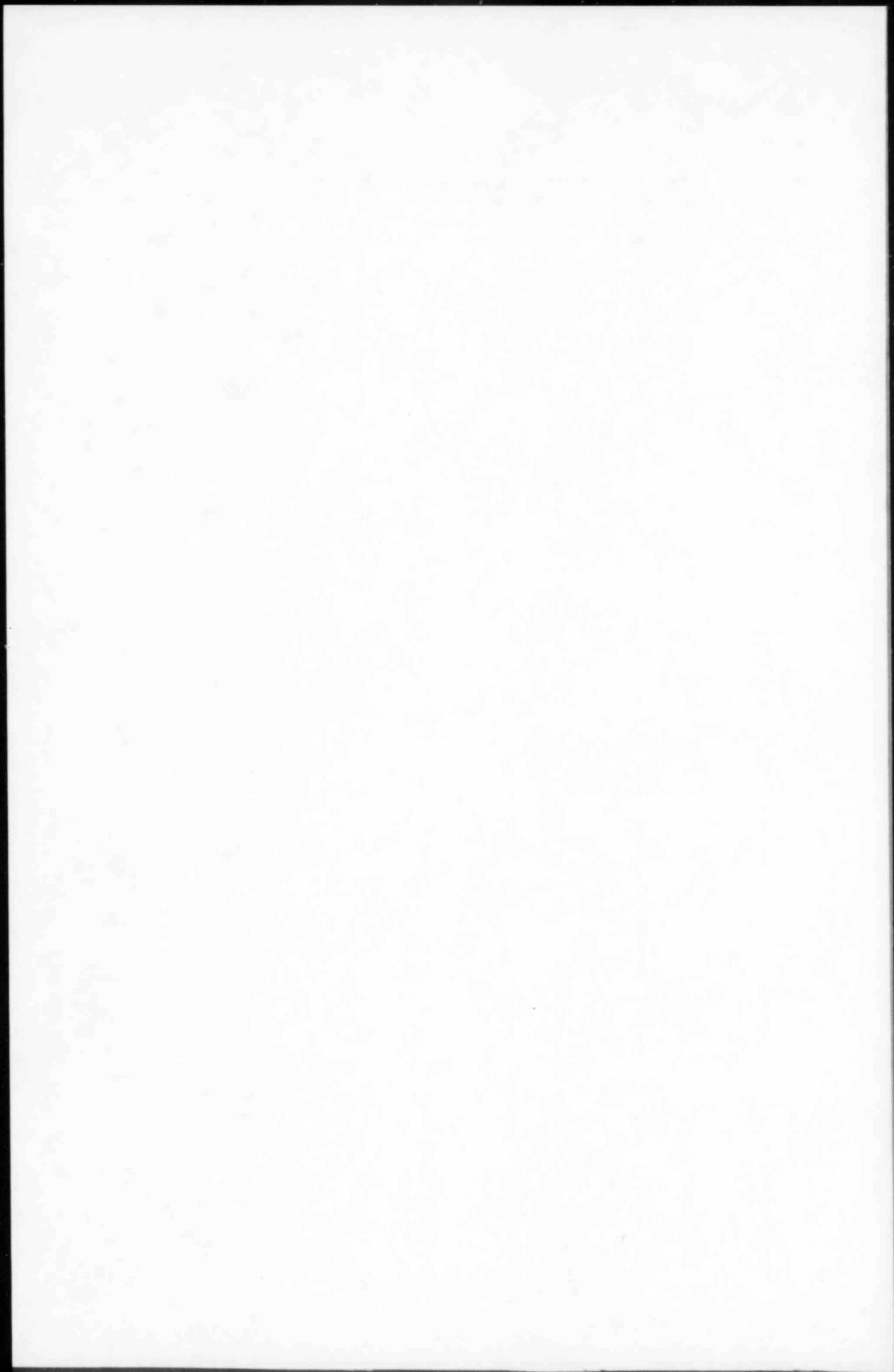
Charmaz thought that my attempt was "overdrawn" and the cases used from Lundahl's article too modest, a point also made by Weibust and Mickel. Perhaps they were correct in that view. But I do not believe that the exercise distorted the testimony of the NDEr nor misrepresented what, even in this early stage, seem to be its social images. My argument may have been overdrawn because I did not wait long enough or search widely enough for that additional detail before embarking on what Weibust wittily called my "scouting expedition." But if I have been impatient, it has not been for more details of the transcendent society but for more critical discussion and debate about the social character of NDEs.

The generation of debate and discussion that an early project attracts can itself often provide a rich and diverse set of ideas and suggestions. Frequently it is that discourse toward which we look for an understanding and a perspective. And for this worthwhile and valuable exchange, I thank the editor and each of the five participating commentators.

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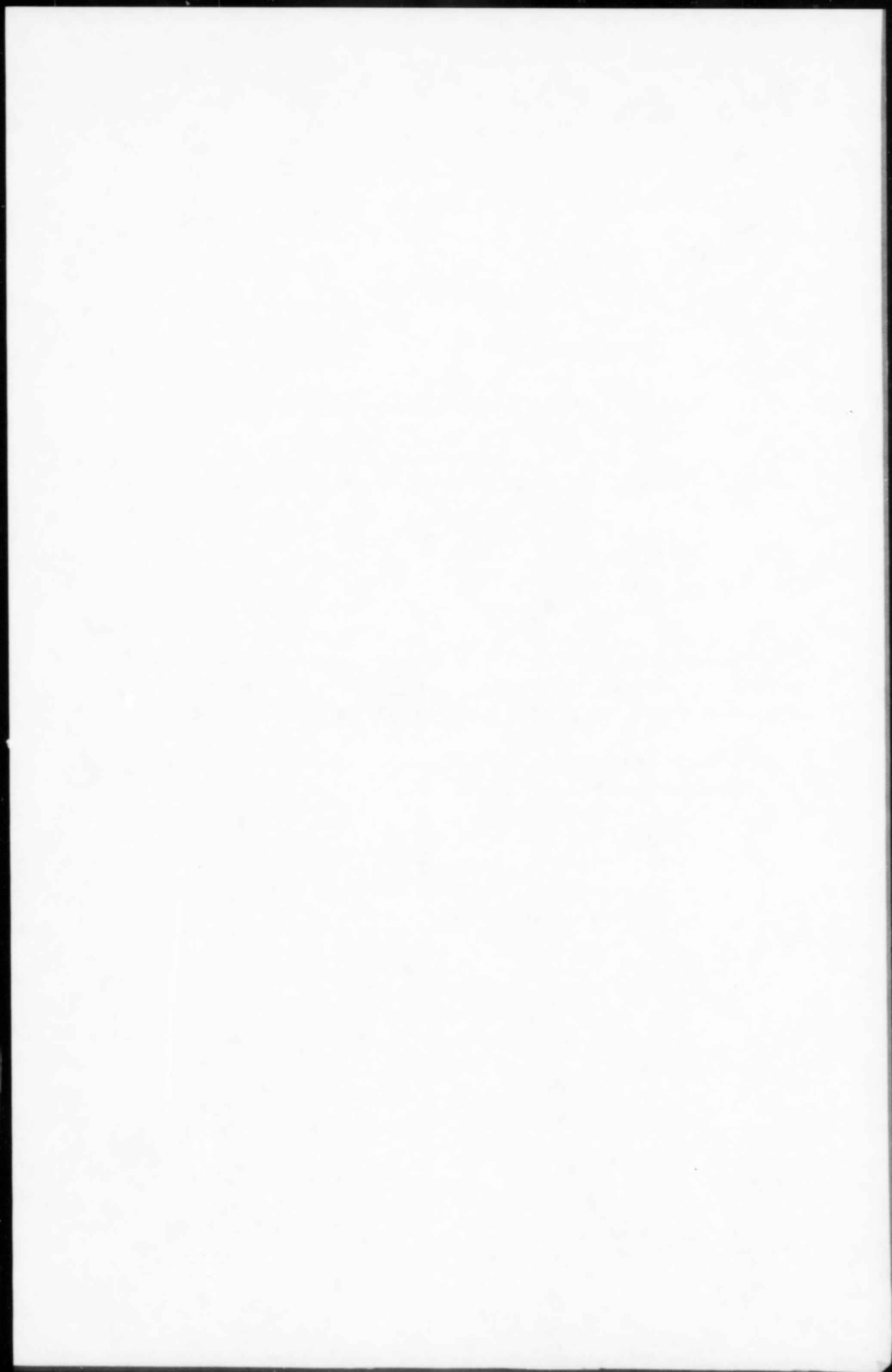
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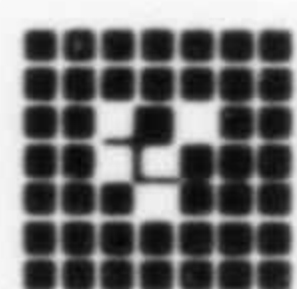
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