



Allan Kellehear. *Visitors at the End of Life: Finding Meaning and Purpose in Near-Death Phenomena.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. 216 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-18215-7.

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Some would like to debate the material “reality” of the vivid mental phenomena that commonly occur in death’s shadow, such as the appearance of ghostly visitors or the radiant “beings of light” described by those resuscitated from near-death. Are these perceptions, remarkably consistent across time and place, the effect of oxygen-starved neurons? Or do they represent a deeper metaphysical truth only glimpsed at the very limit of human consciousness? That debate is tiresome and, Allan Kellehear argues, has distracted from the important work of understanding near-death phenomena in the context of human lifeworlds. Kellehear, a sociologist who has devoted his career to improving palliative care practices, is well positioned to reconstitute the worlds of the dying and the bereaved in which extraordinary occurrences may feel quite natural and reassuring.

In his accessible introduction to near-death phenomena and their cultural meanings, Kellehear centers the narrative relations of self, family, and community that do not cease at the end of an individual’s life. From this perspective, it is not a deep philosophical or neuroscientific puzzle that the dead sometimes visit; they simply do, they always have, and efforts to prove that they are illus-

ory will not avail to stop them. However, the contemporary framing of these phenomena within a “faith versus reason” binary may deter people from sharing their experiences or cause them to fear for their sanity.

Visitors at the End of Life: Finding Meaning and Purpose in Near-Death Phenomena begins by laying out the argument for closer social scientific and clinical attention to near-death phenomena as part of the continuous fabric of human existence. Taking an anthropological or sociological approach to paranormal phenomena is not a new idea, and many scholars have studied these experiences from an agnostic position, but Kellehear addresses an audience that is mainly familiar with popular accounts focused on the search for a scientific explanation. While he intends to set aside the facile materialism/spiritualism dispute, he first debunks the debunkers by highlighting the epistemological instability of the case for neurological causation; in short, it simply is not possible to prove or disprove the objective reality of a person’s inner experience. There is no test that can in all cases distinguish a mental pathology from the appearance of an otherworldly being, only a metaphysical assumption that such beings do not exist.

Kellehear examines three categories of experience. First is the near-death experience (NDE), in which people describe floating above their bodies, entering a long tunnel, and following a light into a higher realm inhabited by dead loved ones and/or supernatural beings of light who offer them a choice to return to earth. The second category is deathbed visions (DBVs), in which the dying report seeing already-dead friends, neighbors, and family members who have come to fetch them. The third category is visions of the bereaved (VBs), in which living persons sense the presence of a dead loved one.

Kellehear deals lightly with his data, preferring a conversational tone and the weaving together of anecdotes. His quantitative research has revealed a prevalence of about 30 percent for DBVs and a similar large minority for related phenomena; across settings, percipients report strongly positive feelings about their visions, which are associated with encouragement, healing, and self-transformation. While the book cites research conducted in the Republic of Moldova and in India, we learn little about the specificity of life, death, and social relations in these contexts. Non-Western societies are presented as “prehistory” to the secular West, having maintained the customs of spiritual communion scorned by rationalistic modernity, an account that is oversimplified. Kellehear acknowledges that present-day Western cultures do have traditions about death and the afterlife, characterized by a prevalent belief in heaven as a place where we are reunited with loved ones and live on in a perfected version of earth. Accounts of heaven, visits to heaven, and communications from heaven continue to attract a vast audience. These are William James’s “healthy-minded,” blithely confident in the benevolent order of things. Kellehear’s sympathies lie with James’s “sick soul” who, confronting a mechanistic universe, struggles to reconstitute human meaning on this existential terrain. Much recent scholarship on secularization illustrates that the West was never as disenchanting as is widely pre-

sumed, and while many grappled with the void of Charles Darwin and deep time, spiritual practices and beliefs continue to play a powerful, though rarely coherent, role in human affairs.

Visitors at the End of Life brings a light anthropological touch to the description of patterns in human cultures, drawing from such figures as Sir James Frazer, Marcel Mauss, and Bronislaw Malinowski but not from newer literature. In constructing an anthropological framework for visitations from the dead, Kellehear asserts the universality of the phenomena alongside certain differences in cultural interpretation. He cites evidence from folklore and the Bible alongside recent anecdotes without reflection on the epistemological status of different kinds of sources. Social forms and patterns of visitation are generalized from this large body of anecdotes: the dead greet their loved ones, show care, and offer snippets of advice, continuing their prior relations. Kellehear argues that context is equally important as content, and we must understand the work that visitations do for both living and dead participants, rather than the mere fact of such an occurrence.

Where Kellehear’s case becomes most interesting is in his ascription of agency to the dead. The inclination of secular analysts is to understand dead visitors as projections, wish fulfillment, or mental aberrations that originate with the living and thus share the social codes of their percipients. While remaining agnostic as to their metaphysical nature, Kellehear assumes that the dead are conscious actors with their own ways and means. He infers from their reported behaviors that they feel love and grief and desire to comfort and protect the living. They seem exceedingly altruistic, though a few are selfish and demanding.

Why are their appearances for the most part constrained to fleeting instants? Kellehear, like earlier psychical researchers, circumscribes what we can know about the passage between worlds to the observed evidence: these appearances have usually been brief and terse or nonverbal, per-

haps constrained by structural factors that require visitors to conduct their business with alacrity. The existence of a class of spiritual practitioners who specialize in more sustained and lucid two-way communications with the dead is not discussed. While spirit channeling falls outside of Kellehear's purview in examining spontaneous manifestations, it certainly offers more anecdotal evidence of the difficulty in relaying messages across the veil, and it is interesting that spiritualists concur with him about the overwhelming desire of the deceased to help the living; he even characterizes them as "service personnel" (p. 74). As Kellehear acknowledges later, this assumption is in some ways a culture-bound one; certain cultures regard the dead as potentially jealous or meddling and maintain social customs that keep them contented. In this regard, I don't think Western people are exceptionally unmoored from the social and religious order of previous generations, as mainstream Christianity has never granted dead individuals much practical power over us.

Visitors at the End of Life contributes to a tradition of inquiry, stretching back to James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), that takes an empirical approach to occurrences at the "vague boundary" between physical and immaterial worlds. Kellehear walks near the Jamesian middle way, open to a range of possibilities, rejecting reductive explanation, and transparent with the reader about his own desires and doubts. Given this, it is notable that Kellehear does not engage with other literature on the scientific investigation of psychical or "psi" phenomena from the late nineteenth century onward. Nor does he contextualize near-death phenomena alongside similar experiences, such as clairvoyance and telepathy, occurring outside the deathbed context. Indeed, a large proportion of the anecdotes collected by psychical researchers under the categories of clairvoyance, telepathy, or apparition could, in Kellehear's framework, be characterized as VBs, occurring both proximally and distally from the

death of the loved one. It is understandable that, in the effort to normalize discussion of near-death phenomena in the clinic, Kellehear may have veered away from other stigmatized and sensationalized phenomena in the psi constellation. This aversion may disappoint some readers, but it allows him to maintain an elegance and economy of focus grounded in his practical work in end-of-life care. Kellehear's book is especially recommended for end-of-life caretakers and clinicians, as a model of expansive listening and sense making that supports contextual interpretations of deeply meaningful events.

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