

Dreams at the edge of death

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Abstract

Death is the great unknown that lies ahead for all of us, shaping the way we choose to live our lives. Is it the end of our being, or a transition to something different? Many people facing death, from Socrates to the present day, have had visionary dreams hinting at another level of reality beyond death, after which they lose all fear of death. This article presents a selection of visions from the edge of death, including some from New Zealanders, to invite consideration of how this perspective can make a difference to clinical practice. This topic was presented at the NZAP Conference in Nelson, 2010, as a basis for discussion with a group of practitioners, who all contributed thoughts and examples from their own experience, thus greatly expanding the range of material. Here is the skeleton for others to hold a similar discussion.

Socrates' dream

Since ancient times some records have survived of powerful dreams and visionary experiences around the time of death. One such is that of Socrates, 500 years before Christ, as recorded by his disciple Plato, and quoted by Kelly Bulkeley (2008), a modern scholar of dream literature:

The dialogue known as the *Crito* opened with Socrates sleeping in his prison cell, while the Athenian authorities awaited the arrival of a religiously ceremonial boat that would signal the time for his execution. His friend Crito was sitting there when Socrates awoke just before dawn, and Socrates immediately declared that the boat in question would not arrive that day:

Crito: What makes you think that?

Socrates: I am going by a dream that I had in the night, only a little while ago.

Crito: What was the dream about?

Socrates: I thought I saw a gloriously beautiful woman dressed in white robes, who came up to me and addressed me in these words, 'Socrates, to the pleasant land of Phthia on the third day thou shalt come...'

Crito: Your dream makes no sense, Socrates.

Socrates: To my mind, Crito, it is perfectly clear (Bulkeley, 2008, pp. 147 – 148).

The words spoken by the beautiful woman (explains Bulkeley) were quoted from The Iliad, from a passionate speech given by Achilles when he was planning to abandon the Trojan War and return to his home in Phthia. As it turned out, Achilles never made it back home. He returned to the battle, fought heroically and died. Socrates was about to die for a very different cause, that of truth and spiritual freedom. His dream seemed to suggest that death would bring him to the ultimate spiritual paradise, a kind of transcendental homecoming. The philosopher would achieve what the warrior could not.

Thus Socrates drank the poison without fear, expecting to enter a new life in a “pleasant land.”

Mediaeval death visions

Carol Zaleski’s “Otherworld journeys” (1987) provides a comprehensive summary and discussion of Western near-death literature from ancient times to modern, observing that there are many similarities in the reports of survivors, but also significant differences between the historical periods. The accounts in mediaeval times were mainly recorded by monastic scribes, and tended to be strongly shaped by religious beliefs, such as the expectation of passing through scenes of purgatorial torment before the faithful arrive at the “ineffable Light”, whereas modern accounts rarely include any scenes of punishment for sin. In this they reflect a major shift in the dominant religious and cultural understandings which underlie survivors’ stories.

Compare the ancient Greek story with the account given by Pope Gregory the Great in the 6th century AD, in his fourth book of Dialogues, as quoted by Zaleski (1987). He is reporting the story of a Roman soldier who had died of the plague.

A certain soldier in this city of ours happened to be struck down. He was drawn out of his body and lay lifeless, but he soon returned [to life] and described what befell him. At that time there were many people experiencing these things. He said that there was a bridge, under which ran a black gloomy river which breathed forth an intolerably foul-smelling vapour. But across the bridge there were delightful meadows carpeted with green grass and sweet-smelling flowers. The meadows seemed to be meeting places for people clothed in white. Such a pleasant odour filled the air that the sweet smell by itself was enough to satisfy [the hunger of] the inhabitants who were strolling there. In that place each one had his own separate dwelling, filled with magnificent light. A house of amazing capacity was being constructed there, apparently out of golden bricks, but he could not find out for whom it might be. On the bridge there was a test. If any unjust person wished to cross, he slipped and fell into the dark and stinking water. But the just, who were not blocked by guilt, freely and easily made their way across to the region of delight (pp 29-30).

Gregory understood the vision symbolically, but it was widely known by scholars of the time.

The modern near-death-experience

Compare this again with a typical modern report, taken from my own collection:

Xanthe, 60, was visiting her daughters overseas when she went to bed with a bad cold. It developed into pneumonia and she lost consciousness. Her daughters, alarmed, called an ambulance and she was taken to hospital.

Dream report: The shining light

I am going down a long black tube that seems to go into the ground. It is very long and dark at the bottom. As I descend I see on my left a passage radiating a strong calming light, very pretty and inviting. I want to go there. The closer I get the more beautiful this magnificent light gets, and I want to know what's on the other side. I feel intrigued, happy and confident, and I start going in; it is so inviting and calming. Suddenly I get sucked back, and start going back up the tube. I don't want to go back. I want to go into the passage with the beautiful light, so I fight back, but still I keep on going up. Then I woke up, not knowing where I was. My two daughters were there; one was crying and the other was holding her hands so tight her knuckles were white. There was a man next to me and a woman dressed in white, and another man standing at the end of the bed. I slowly realized that this was a hospital bed, and I had a mask covering my mouth and nose, and I could breathe, but I was far too tired to tell my daughters about my wonderful tunnel of light.

Comparing the three reports, you can see the similarities and differences across time and culture.

Zaleski (1987) provides a convenient summary of the main modern writers in the field of near-death studies (pp. 104-112.) In 1975, Raymond Moody, a Ph.D in Philosophy, published "Life After Life", a summary of 150 reports he had collected from people who had apparently died and recovered. The foreword was an endorsement by Dr Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, the courageous woman who first turned the spotlight onto dying as a natural process to be studied. Moody listed 15 typical elements of near-death-experiences, which were later grouped by another researcher, Dr Kenneth Ring, into 5 stages:

- A sense of peace, release from struggle;
- Separation from the body, looking down at it;
- Floating through a dark void or tunnel, sometimes aware of a choice;
- Perceiving a brilliant light or "presence" emanating acceptance; and
- A sudden return to the body.

While this is the basic structure across all cultures, each experience has different details, sometimes including such elements as: a life review; meeting deceased relatives; a Being of light (named according to prior beliefs); a continuation into beautiful scenery (fields, gardens, etc); a sense of reluctance to return; and a subsequent lack of fear of death, and commitment to lives of service.

A great deal of research has followed, in a variety of settings, including hospital cardiac wards. It all verifies the basic pattern, especially the early stage in which survivors report watching resuscitation attempts on their bodies, and also their subsequent lack of fear about death. The International Association for Near-Death Studies began in 1978 and continues to collect thousands of cases for study and research.

It seems to me that there is plenty of evidence for everyone to consider, that death may not be the end of our existence, but a transition to another dimension of being, not focussed on material concerns. If we were travelling to another country, we would listen to people who had at least looked over the border, and try to prepare ourselves for the different conditions to be expected. While existence on earth requires our commitment now, what are the values that will transcend death?

Experiences in New Zealand

Over the last 25 years I have personally listened to dozens of near-death stories told by participants in my dream workshops all over New Zealand. The basic pattern is the same, while the details differ. They may even have elements of humour, as in the following account.

Report of experience: Protecting the children

Julie remembers this delightful story told to her by her grandmother Ethel about 30 years ago, who was a Christian with a firm faith in Jesus. The event would have taken place in the late 1920s, when Ethel was in her 30s, long before the availability of antibiotics in New Zealand.

Many years ago when my children were small I was very sick. I was in hospital with double pneumonia. I was unable to breathe. I died and came out of my body. I saw my body lying there. I then went into a tunnel and quickly came out the other side, where I saw a Being of light. I believed this was Jesus, as he was a Being of light, and radiated love and compassion. Jesus said that I could stay in heaven. However, I was very concerned about my husband, as he was very quick-tempered with the children. I said to him that I was worried about my children, particularly my youngest. He said Yes, he knew what my husband was like, and that I could go back. Immediately I was back in my body. I must have been dead some time, as somebody had put the sheet over my face. I recovered, and was able to go back to look after my family.

She was totally unafraid of death from then on. Grandma lived to the ripe old age of 85, when she died of heart failure several years after a severe heart attack. But the doctor resuscitated her, and she told him off, saying she was not afraid to die! All the family heard her say it. She did die a few weeks later.

In the words of Bulkeley (2005):

When a person experiences a pre-death dream, the benefits often extend beyond just the dreamer... dreams become part of the family lore, shared and discussed and treasured for years. Pre-death dreams also act as inspirations for others (p.139).

A Maori near-death-experience

One of the most interesting examples I have read in New Zealand, for its historical implications, is the account given by Michael King (1983) in his biography of Dame Whina Cooper. She was an active Catholic all her life. The dream happened in 1974, when she was 60 years old, and very sick. Behind the humorous style of her telling, you can catch the typical features of what sounds like a near-death-experience:

Dream Report: Your work's not completed yet

I dreamt I went to heaven. I walked there. It turned out to be just past Panguru, behind the church and the presbytery. I knew I'd got there because all the people I knew that were dead, my cousins and other relatives, were sitting on the bank where the road goes past the church. So I said to them, "Hey! What do you eat up here in heaven?" And they said, "Puha." So that was that. Then I walked on a bit further, and at last I saw God coming towards me. He was only a short chap with a Pakeha face and a long beard, and he had these eyes that flashed and flickered. I could hardly look at Him. Anyway, He said to me in Maori, "Where are you

going?" And I said, "I'm coming up here to Heaven." He said, "Oh no, you're not. Not yet. Your work's not completed." So I had to turn round and walk back. After that I thought, oh well, I'll just have to keep going (1983, pp 204-5).

And in fact it was the following year, 1975, that Whina Cooper organised and led the Land March on Parliament. You can imagine how she drew strength from her dream.

A complex near-death-experience

Finally, here is a remarkable story from a recent workshop, offering much food for thought.

Nadine was 46, a full-time mother and farmer's wife, when she felt a "heaviness" in her chest and managed to get to the local doctor.

Report of experience: My dad supported me

The doctor called an ambulance immediately, even though the test he had done showed up as normal. When the ambulance arrived there was only one person; he decided to wait and call for another person to drive so he could sit beside me in the back. Within a few minutes' driving I had a heart attack and was resuscitated. The medical report said I "flat-lined." Amazing that the ambulance guy had called for backup, otherwise I would have not made it. In A&E at the provincial hospital I remember a sort of fleeting vision of standing by my body, near my head and watching the team working frantically. I went back in to my body and felt the terrible pain and then slowly it started to lift.

After nearly 10 days in ICU and three heart attacks very late one night as I barely held on to life, the City Hospital finally had some room and dispatched a retrieval team in a helicopter to pick me up and take me there to do the procedure my heart needed. At 3am as we were flying in the helicopter I looked out at the stars in the darkness of the sky and thought that would be my last experience of my life. At the big hospital they were inserting stents into my heart arteries. It was supposed to be a regular procedure of 20 minutes or so.

You have to be awake for this procedure so that you can indicate when the pressure is released. The pain was so sharp, intense and horrific I left my body. I was exhausted from the weeks of pain and could not resist the pull toward a light that was flooding from a doorway similar to the end of a long hallway. I was motionlessly floating toward it, then my Dad came towards me, from the doorway. I couldn't move or speak. He spoke to me and said he knew how bad I felt and that he would carry me, carry my pain for me as it was not my time to leave. He was Dad at his very best, in good shape and wearing his favorite blue shirt with his brown trousers, the ones Mum always told him off about. She didn't like him to wear brown and blue, funny now it has become so fashionable.

Anyway, Dad grabbed hold of me and carried me across his arms. I could smell him and feel his warmth. I was glad to be with him and feel all his love and protection. I wish I could have talked to him but I did not have the strength. He just spoke to me gently, "Just rest, just rest, you're nearly there, I've got you, sweetheart." Then like a jolt, I heard the familiar voice of the specialist, who was strongly calling me: "Mrs X, Mrs X!" and somehow in a flash I felt the heaviness of my body and I was back in it. I was breathing in my body. Later, I told the doctor of my experience and he explained to me that, during the procedure, when they were inserting the second stent, my artery split open. "That's when you would have seen the light," he said. I had three stents inserted and am healing slowly. Life is very different for me now and I am struggling in various ways, for various reasons. However, I would have to say that I have peace about when your time to die is. It seemed from my experience that unknown to me someone was in charge and someone was saying it was not my time.

This is a very mystical, faith-full experience, as within the process of near-death I have gathered more sincerity in the process of life. I feel more intensely now about the question of 'What is my life purpose?' I mean, I have survived, so how do I repay the gift? Is it the chance to be true to my self and just be free from justification or expectation? I don't know why I survived, but I did, so I will try to honor the gift of time I have been given.

Conclusion

Stories like this are life-changing. They are told in many of the workshops I lead, and have a powerful impact on all the listeners, but they are not often told in ordinary conversation, for fear of being ridiculed. I think that we as therapists can not only listen respectfully to such experiences, but also explore them seriously, and be ready to pass the storyline on to others who are struggling with questions of grief, death and meaning.

References

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