

Letters to the Editor

NDEs and the Pursuit of the Ideal Society

To the Editor:

In your Foreword to the Winter 1991 issue of the Journal, you invited other scholars to pursue Allan Kellehear's (1991a) lead regarding the near-death experience (NDE) providing a pattern for the ideal society. Presumptuously, I will claim to be a scholar in order to accept that invitation. My involvement with NDEs dates back to the 1981 beginnings of the International Association for Near-Death Studies, which may imply some credentials, but in another area, as a lifelong Swedenborgian, Kellehear's article and the five subsequent commentaries cry out to me for a different response.

Kellehear based his article on reports by experiencers of a wondrous realm of love, harmony, and peace, and suggested that these transcendent societies provide models from which we mortals can create a utopian civilization on earth. The unbelievably widespread near-death experience has seldom been claimed as an extended adventure into heaven and/or hell. The brief glimpse and usually deliberate choice to return was compared to a traveler's arriving at the airport but reembarbarking before really seeing the sights. No matter how attractive the brief stay, few would consider the NDE as fully representing an eternal life in paradise—or the unattractive alternative.

As I pointed out a decade ago in this Journal (Rhodes, 1982), few accounts compare with the supernal experiences of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), who moved freely between mortal consciousness and exploration of the spiritual world awaiting us all after death. His bestseller *Heaven and Its Wonders and Hell* carried the subtitle *From Things Seen and Heard*. This astonishing claim was made by Europe's foremost scientist, respected for his keen analytical mind and impeccable honesty, and still ranked among the leading philosophers of all

time. His assertions of having explored the spiritual world have been cited by leading NDE commentators, and his descriptions dating back to the 1770s are strikingly consistent with the testimony of countless modern experiencers.

Swedenborg gave fascinating descriptions of visits into the realm beyond death, reporting lengthy conversations with the inhabitants he called "angels" as well as their counterparts. He described banquets, clothing, houses and palaces, meadows and flowers. He did explain how the heavens are arranged and divided into harmonious kingdoms, and presented a logical account of how newly arrived spirits actually choose which "society" they will inhabit in order to dwell among spirits like themselves.

As Kellehear declared, these spiritual communities are wondrously perfect places in which to live, even to eternity, and they may therefore offer ideal models for humanity's aspirations to create a utopia. Swedenborg's followers really do hope that their governments and the lives of the inhabitants here on earth will come as close as possible to the ideals Swedenborg described. They would hope, as did Kellehear in his rejoinder, that such images will "play a role in the task of personal and social change" (1991b, p. 135).

References

- Kellehear, A. (1991a). Near-death experiences and the pursuit of the ideal society. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 10, 79-95.
- Kellehear, A. (1991b). Glimpses of utopia near death? A rejoinder. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 10, 135-141.
- Rhodes, L. S. (1982). The NDE enlarged by Swedenborg's vision. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 2, 15-35.

Leon Rhodes
Box 23
Bryn Athyn, PA 19009

Kenneth Ring's Swan Song

To the Editor:

This letter was motivated by, but is not about, Kenneth Ring's apparent swan song in a recent issue of this Journal, in which he