

BOOK REVIEW

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The Final Entrance: Journeys Beyond Life, by Susan L. Schoenbeck. Madison, WI: Prairie Oak Press, 1997, 164 pp., \$17.95.

Susan Schoenbeck has worked as a nurse, researcher, and educator. Her professional background gives her the authority to write about death, dying, and survival; however, it is her care and compassion that envelop readers. She achieves her heart's desire, to foster the spiritual growth of others, in this exceptional book.

The Final Entrance is intended for professionals and the general audience. Most of it focuses on topics that are of special interest to readers of this Journal: near-death experiences, out-of-body incidents, discarnate entities, deathbed visions, and survival of death in general. Touching anecdotes, meaningful research, and reliable citations support the author's thesis and major points. The lists of outstanding features are highlighted by bullets, making them convenient to examine. Sensitively written and well organized, the book is an easy, interesting, and enjoyable read.

The title, by the way, is, as Bruce Greyson points out in his eloquent introduction, "at once both revealing and misleading" (p. xi). Isn't death just another portal, and not *the final* entrance? Schoenbeck's thesis is that death is a doorway to another existence, and in that respect it is an effective title.

In the first eight pages of Chapter One ("Death is a Life Event"), Schoenbeck says basically that to overlook the spiritual aspect of dying is to disenfranchise one of the most remarkable features of death. She concludes this section: "It is my hope that someday the wonders

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of science and medicine will be balanced with the needs of the human spirit” (p. 8). Actually, the author does not have to wait until *someday* to find the balance. Numerous hospitals now require that every staff member (from receptionists to nurses and physicians) complete a chaplaincy program in order to recognize and support the spiritual needs of their patients.

Next, Schoenbeck offers a brief historical overview of near-death experiences, and then dedicates the rest of the chapter to their characteristics (sense of peace, tunnel, light, life review, and so on). She concludes by presenting the phenomenal life changes that typically result from NDEs and her answer to the logical question:

Why aren't there millions of spiritually-charged people out there doing good works?

One, the process of change is difficult and may take years. . . .

We hold onto the old shoes even if they have holes in the soles, because we do not want to go through the trouble and discomfort involved in changing to a new pair. . . .

[Near-death experiencers] stay in the past busy with all their old responsibilities and frenetic activities that provide excuses for their not taking the time and effort to advance their spiritual development and service to mankind. . . .

Secondly, the opportunity to be heard is not always there for near-death experiencers. (p. 21)

Most authors commonly omit theories, concepts, or aspects thereof, for brevity or simplification. During the editing process, material is further condensed. Every author I know struggles with this issue to some degree. While reading this section of the book, I wondered if that was the case with Schoenbeck, because there are two more reasons why NDErs are not *out there*. One is personality type. Being *out there* is not the introvert's style. An individual can be an effective spiritual catalyst by very private means. A carpenter does not need a jackhammer or coliseum to do good work. Secondly, being *out there* is not part of every experiencer's journey. Ram Dass once confronted Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, "You have thousands of cases, proof of reincarnation. You should be out there convincing people." "That's your journey," Elisabeth explained, "not mine."

Readers can examine the list of commonalities found in stories about spirits (Chapter Two, "Spirits Among Us"). Such stories "sensitize the sacred space within" (p. 25), and of the 15 stories presented in this chapter, none is more touching than the author's own childhood anecdote—her first remembrance of being in spirit form.

“Deathbed Talks” (Chapter Three) focuses on apparitions that are seen and heard by the dying. The purpose of these discarnate spirits is to escort the departing “into another existence” (p. 48). A major point emphasized by the author is that no one leaves this world unattended. Several years ago a physician appeared on numerous television shows to promote his new book, in which he warned families, “Your loved ones are terrified of dying by themselves. You must be there for them.” His statements still cause hospice staff to cringe because patients often die (intentionally, in some cases) while family and friends are absent. A common complaint among survivors, who are left to wrestle with their sorrow and grief for many years thereafter, is that they were unable to be there. The physician was pleading, in effect: Don’t be so fearful of death that you abandon your terminally ill loved ones. Unfortunately, however, his remarks brought more death anxiety to our already anxious society. People simply do not die alone, and to implant that thought is cruel to patients and their caregivers. As death approaches, everyone is in the accompaniment of deceased relatives or an unconditionally loving presence; therefore, I applaud Schoenbeck and her thoroughness in this chapter.

The terminally ill commonly talk about being with deceased loved ones, seeing glimpses of the world beyond, preparing to go to that world, controlling their time of death, and so on (p. 50). Schoenbeck’s anecdote about her grandfather introduces readers to her sense of humor, and it demonstrates that although death is a difficult subject, it doesn’t have to be difficult to talk about:

My grandfather celebrated every life event with a drink—all holidays, all weddings, all birthdays. And when he retired from the railroad at age 74, every day became a holiday. . . . His hard and honest way of living made his hour of death even more poignant to me. . . .

The paramedics didn’t know my grandfather. At 84, after a full life and sure sense of what he was entering, he would not have wanted their CPR. Grandpa was going to a new life. This was a day to celebrate. I know Grandfather would have just wanted one more chaser. Since they didn’t offer him that, he quickly left. (pp. 56–57)

Another anecdote, Jan’s story, brings forth a valid point about dying: people often choose the time of death. After a long illness, Jan’s mother, Minnie, lay in a nursing home, unresponsive and totally silent. Then, on January 7, Minnie suddenly stirred and asked a nurse for the date. Jan was immediately summoned to the nursing home, but by the time she arrived her mother had died. Jan understood. Minnie’s husband

and son had died years prior, on January 7 (pp. 65–67). Schoenbeck concludes this chapter, “It’s funny how when you’re in this business a long time you recognize death coming and, like the patient, you are not afraid” (p. 70).

“When My Eyelids Open in Death” (Chapter Four) focuses on near-death experiences, wherein readers can review the classic characteristics: experiencers move out of the body, feel no pain, travel through a tunnel and light, meet deceased relatives and beings of light, feel peace, and so on (pp. 74–75). Readers are then offered 19 accounts to explore, including frightening or unsettling experiences.

In Chapter Five, “If I Should Die . . . Let Me Go,” Schoenbeck is saying that most terminally people reach a point of wanting to leave this world. She lists their reasons: longing to be free from pain, life purpose has been fulfilled, loved ones are ready to accept the death, and so on. She then states that their not wanting to leave is the result of either yearning to accomplish something or a feeling of obligation to someone here on earth (pp. 108–109). As I read this section, I thought of three other reasons patients do not want to die: they are waiting for a certain date (such as an anniversary or holiday), anticipating a special circumstance (a son’s arrival from the military, the birth of a grandchild, and so on), or they simply fear death or some aspect of it. Schoenbeck concludes this chapter with a significant point:

Research has shown that cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) has limited use for the elderly with multisystem problems. Few survive. Those who survive most often do not regain their prior level of functioning . . . On the average, only two percent of nursing home residents, with a mean age of 82, survive CPR. (p. 121)

Although it may be difficult, there is, indeed, a time to let them go.

In Chapter Six, Schoenbeck covers the art of giving “Comfort Care,” wherein she explains that understanding NDEs enables her to help others. She promises, for example, that no one dies alone, and that the other realm is a good place. In cases where the deaths were caused by devastating injuries, she assures the bereaved that their loved ones were out of their bodies and felt no pain. “Perhaps this is one of the reasons near-death events occur—that others whose lives are touched by death may be comforted” (p. 126). She ends this chapter with the conclusion: “*For the dying it’s comforting. For the living, it’s comforting*” (p. 126).

In “Facts and Beliefs” (Chapter Seven), Schoenbeck lists 16 questions that allow readers to test their knowledge about death. She concludes

by presenting four common theories that scientists believe cause NDEs: drug-induced hallucinations, oxygen deprivation, hyperactivity in the brain, and ego defense theory (pp. 140–141).

In Chapter Eight, which is less than two pages in length, Schoenbeck restates common themes surrounding death, as reported by near-death experiencers. Readers are reminded that NDEs offer potent lessons. In the ninth and final chapter the author suggests “what you can do” to grow spiritually and help others know about death: open yourself up to feeling the spirits all around, decide what you believe about survival, and be with the dying and their families (pp. 145–146). I hope that readers will seriously probe her 24 questions presented in “Plan Your Final Entrance” (pp. 147–148) because no one knows what tomorrow will bring, and when plans for the future are more secure, most people live life more fully.

Schoenbeck’s final conclusions are: no one dies alone, the spirit can exist outside the body, unconditional love is there to welcome the dying, and “peace and dignity can accompany death” (p. 153).

I have only two issues with the book. I was enjoying the meaningful quotes of Plato, Sigmund Freud, Victor Frankl, and Scott Peck when I happened upon one by my former colleague, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Catapulted into such fond reflections, I wanted more; thus, I turned to scan the index. Unfortunately, it was missing. A book and author of this caliber deserve an index.

Secondly, in her postscript, Schoenbeck claims that she did not provide readers with anything new (p. 155). I disagree. For individuals just beginning to investigate death, dying, and survival, this book is a deep well of discovery. In the case of seasoned researchers, clinicians, and other readers who have long been engaged in the field, *The Final Entrance* is, at the very least, inspirational.