Near Death Experiences
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Reading: Kahlil Gibran On Death
If you would know the secret of death...
on your heart wide unto the body of life.
For life and death are one,
even as the river and the sea are one.
In the depth of your hopes and desires
lies your silent knowledge of the beyond;
And like seeds dreaming beneath the snow
your heart dreams of spring.
Trust the dreams, for in them is hidden the gate to eternity.
For what is it to die
but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun?
And what is to cease breathing,
but to free the breath from its restless tides,
that it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered?
Only when you drink from the river of silence
shall you indeed sing.
And when you have reached the mountaintop,
then you shall begin to climb.
And when the earth shall claim your limbs,
then shall you truly dance.

Sermon
Death separates us from those we love. It is painful, and there is no way around the feeling of grief. Grief comes to all of us eventually, unless death itself claims us early. Gregory Orr writes about it in a poem:

Grief will come to you.
Grip and cling all you want,
It makes no difference.

Catastrophe? It's just waiting to happen.
Loss? You can be certain of it.

Flow and swirl of the world.
Carried along as if by a dark current.

All you can do is keep swimming;
All you can do is keep singing.

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2 From How Beautiful the Beloved
As human beings we must deal with the grief of death. Death is a universal part of life, a flow that includes all living beings. We can remember, we can share, we can weep, we can reach out to others, we can go on. We know that some other animals grieve too. Elephants return to the bones of their family members. Dogs have visited the graves of their persons.

But human beings also wonder about the mystery of death. We wonder, When the body ends, does the person end as well? Or does the person go on in some new way? Does consciousness blink out, with no more awareness of self or world? Is consciousness a function of the brain? If the brain dies, does consciousness die too? Many scientists hold such a view, and certainly some of us in this congregation have expressed that belief.

There is no sign in the physical world to indicate anything but absence. But when it comes down to it, death is a mystery. I've often heard it said, no one comes back from the dead to tell us about it. But perhaps that is only partially true. For some people have come back, after being medically dead for a short time. And some of those who were near death in that way have shared experiences that seem to indicate there might be something beyond the veil.

People have spoken of passing through a dark tunnel, and seeing light, seeing loved ones, and a sense of overwhelming peace and love. These are some of the features that make up what is called a “near-death experience.” Some others that have been identified are a feeling of being dead, a sense of being out of the body, sometimes being able to see what is happening to your body from up above. Some people report beautiful pastoral scenes, or beings made of light who communicate without words. Some people experience a sense of God being present to them in a real way. Most report a profound love and sense of connection with everything. The vast majority of such experiences are profoundly life changing for the person.

Near death experiences pose a dilemma for scientists. It is not an area that is easy to research. You can't purposefully bring people to the point of death to study what experience they report. But surprisingly, there has been a lot of research about near death experiences. Dr. Peter Fenwick reported on thirty years of research in a paper published in 2004. They have learned some things. About 10% of people who come close to death, or are declared clinically dead, report such experiences. Religious belief at the time of the experience seems to play no role in who has a near death experience.

“The phenomena reported during NDEs included 66 percent who reported an out-of-body experience, 76 percent [reported] pastoral landscapes, 38 percent seeing deceased friends and relatives, 12 percent [report] life reviews, 24 percent a barrier of some sort, and 72 percent a decision to return.” Whom someone meets in the experience is often culturally determined, as well as how it is described. 72% of people report a profound transformation after the event, becoming more spiritual, and less afraid of dying.  

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4 http://iands.org/research/important-research-articles/42-dr-peter-fenwick-md-science-and-spirituality.html?start=1
Some studies have been done with cardiac patients, with a control group of cardiac patients who did not have near death experiences. It did not seem to matter whether they were on medication, or the duration of the cardiac arrest for determining who had a near death experience. Cardiac patients were more likely than others near death to have near death experiences.

Many scientists assume that near death experiences are hallucinations likely caused by lack of oxygen or changes in brain chemistry. That may be true. A recent study done with rats showed a burst of electrical activity in the brain right after the heart shut down. It would mean that the near death experience happened in a moment as the brain was shutting down, rather than while the patient was fully unconscious.

But some scientists who study the phenomena are not convinced that any of these explanations adequately explain the experience. For example, out of body experiences sometimes include descriptions of scenes that are later verified to be accurate to what was happening. The reality is that we still have no idea what causes the experience. We just know that the experience exists, and has certain features, and happens to a significant number of people.

Dr. Eben Alexander was firmly planted in the realm of science, a highly trained academic neurosurgeon. He believed that if you didn't have a working brain, you wouldn't have consciousness. He didn't know the cause of near death experiences, but he knew that they must be brain-based.\(^5\) But then his own brain was attacked by a rare meningitis that sent him into a coma for seven days, and almost killed him. His neo-cortex completely shut down. Statistically, he should have died.

The neocortex is the part of the brain that is responsible for thinking and feeling, the part that makes us human, the part one might associate with consciousness. And yet, during this time, while he was aware of nothing in the physical world, he had an experience that changed everything he thought he knew. He wrote about it in a book, entitled *Proof of Heaven*, that I read during this past summer.

I don't want to recount all the medical detail he included—I encourage you to read the book yourself if you are curious. But as a neurosurgeon, when he later learned what had been happening in his brain, or rather, how much was not happening, he became convinced that there was no way his brain could have produced his experience. He re-thought what he had believed about consciousness—his experience proved, at least to him, that consciousness could be separate from the brain and the body.

Last week I spoke about how as Unitarian Universalists, we rely on human experience to be a source of knowledge about mysterious questions—questions about God, about spirituality. Our experience is not infallible—it is influenced by our culture and our expectations—but we take it seriously. Of course, it is always easier to take one's own experience more seriously than the experience of someone else.

Dr. Alexander wrote about his own near death experience. He describes finding himself first in a soupy, dark, muddy nothingness that seemingly had no beginning or end. There was no sense of time there, but he grew increasingly uncomfortable, and then something new emerged. A spinning melody of light, became an opening into a completely new world. This world was brilliant, green, lush, earthlike, an idyllic pastoral landscape, he called the Gateway. He was flying on something like a butterfly wing, with a beautiful girl next to him who helped him understand what was going on. She spoke to him, but without any words.

Later, when he put the message into words, it had three parts: “You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever.” “You have nothing to fear.” “There is nothing you can do wrong.”

He was flooded with relief and the feeling of its truth. He says in that realm seeing and hearing were like one sense, and in fact, it wasn't as if you were looking at anything, because everything was a part of everything else. If he had a question, the answer would spring up along with the question inside him, in an explosion of light, color, love and beauty.

He kept moving forward and then entered an immense void, dark, infinite in size, yet also “infinitely comforting.” His companion was now an orb of light, who somehow mediated this experience—for it was as if he were in a womb, and the mother was God, the source of everything. Later, he used the words of a seventeenth century poet Henry Vaughan, “There is, some say, in God a deep but dazzling darkness.”

In the void, he learned that there were countless universes, and while some small measure of evil was present in them, love was the center of them all. He saw many higher dimensions of existence, that were intricately meshed with our own terrestrial realm. Then he was gradually drawn back down through the Gateway to the muddy realm of his first experience.

But he longer felt the trepidation of before. He discovered that all he had to do was think of the spinning melody, and it would return to bring him back to the Gateway, and to the dark and holy Core. He went back and forth between these worlds any number of times. All of his experiences confirmed the message that he had originally received—You are loved and cherished. You have nothing to fear. There is nothing you can do wrong.

He wrote: “The unconditional love and acceptance that I experienced on my journey is the single most important discovery I have ever made, or will ever make.”

At some point, he found he could no longer return to the Gateway. He was on his way back to his life, but profoundly changed. After seven days in a coma, the doctors were ready to give up on him, talked to his family about his death being imminent. Then he woke up.

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6 Alexander, p. 41.
7 p. 47.
8 p. 73.
After a few moments of lucidity, he went through a period of ICU confusion and paranoia, but made a full recovery over several months. His experience beyond his body remained vivid, and real. He wrote it all down, and then began to study other examples of near death experiences. He read all his medical records, and tried to make sense of what had happened.

Ultimately, he felt there were no good explanations, except to say that consciousness exists apart from the body; and perhaps the function of our brains, rather than generating consciousness, is to filter it out, so that we experience only a narrow view of what is out there. That was his experience of his brain as he came back to everyday life.

What do we do with such experiences? For me, there is a comfort in them. I am inclined to believe that there is a larger reality than what we can see and hear in our everyday lives. We know so little about the universe, and so much is mysterious. I have not had a near death experience myself, but I know people who have. One friend was in a coma for several weeks—before I knew her. She described making journeys outside of her body in which she visited friends and knew what was going on. I have experienced visits from loved ones after they died—I remember a really real dream in which my former partner appeared and comforted my heart that was so sad.

These experiences of the afterlife do not fit exactly with the dogma of most religions, but they also challenge the dogma of scientific suppositions. More and more scientists are becoming interested in doing research in areas that were before considered impossible to research. I hope that science and spirituality find more ways to be in dialogue with each other. Truthfully, science does not yet know how to explain these experiences—all of it is hypothesis.

But even if these experiences are somehow created by the brain in the moment of dying, that too should be comforting. What a beautiful thing that peace and love can fill a person, take away their fear, and expand their sense of meaning and harmony. It is a return to love.

I take comfort in the messages that so many report—that the universe is made of love and consciousness. That we are loved. That we have nothing to fear. It fits with my own limited experiences of the divine spirit. It is always about love.

But still, since it is a mystery, let me end with a Zen parable. A nobleman asked Master Hakuin, “What happens to the enlightened man at death?”
“Why ask me?” said Hakuin.
“Because you’re a Zen master.”
“Yes, but not a dead one.”

Closing Words:
All goes onward and outward--nothing collapses;
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

Walt Whitman

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10 From Leaves of Grass.