



Hospice Doctor Documents End-of-Life Experiences of His Patients

The Wired Word for the Week of March 31, 2024

In the News

When Christopher Kerr was 12 years old, his father died. But before his death, he had a vision of going fishing with Christopher, who never forgot the experience. Kerr now works as the chief medical officer at Hospice Buffalo, where he has recorded the end-of-life dreams and visions (ELDVs) of thousands of terminally ill patients for more than a decade.

According to Kerr, almost 90% of dying patients have vivid, meaningful dreams featuring deceased family members or pets in significant scenes from their past that seem "more real than real." The interviews Kerr and his team conducted revealed that most ELDVs did not contain religious themes or figures. Instead, patients reported seeing loved ones waiting for them, preparing for a journey or traveling with companions or guides. Such visions may reassure patients that they won't need to face the experience of dying alone. Knowing they have an escort can give them a sense of security.

In end-of-life experiences (ELEs), the dying may revisit times when they experienced great joy and love, the pain of rejection or betrayal, or some unfinished business in need of resolution. A classic example of this type of end-of-life phenomena occurs in the movie, *Citizen Kane*, when the dying tycoon whispers, "Rosebud!" (In case you haven't seen the movie, we won't reveal the meaning of his final words so as not to spoil it for you.)

"Time seems to vanish," Kerr observed. "The people who loved you well, secured you and contributed to who you are are still accessible at a spiritual and psychological level."

Knowing that such experiences are normal can give patients and their loved ones comfort. When a dying person is at peace, the bereaved may also be consoled.

These ELEs may help the dying prepare for their final hours by healing pain from past traumas or broken relationships; bringing a sense of warmth, acceptance, tranquility and forgiveness; and easing feelings of guilt, anxiety or fear of the unknown. Sometimes ELEs produce personal growth and understanding about what is important in life. Kerr said, "It highlights the paradox of dying, that while there is physical deterioration, they are growing and finding meaning. It highlights what patients are telling us, that they are being put back together."

Mary Sansone volunteered as a comfort care companion for Moffitt Cancer Center, where she was told that "a person's fear of death often diminishes as a direct result of ELDVs, and what arises is a new insight into mortality. The emotional impact is so frequently positive, comforting, and paradoxically life affirming."

Some use words like "sacred," "reverence," "mystery" and "transcendent" when describing ELEs. Kerr insists they are not the same as medicine-induced hallucinations or delirium, which can produce delusions, incoherent thinking, confusion, agitation, fear and anxiety. People who have ELEs generally can describe their experience in clear, coherent terms, and most find ELEs reassuring. About 20% of ELEs were upsetting to patients.

Kerr's research, published in 2014 in the *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, found that ELEs can occur while patients are asleep or awake. They can begin days, even weeks before death.

Kerr advocates that doctors need to return "to the bedside, to their roots as comforters of the dying rather than as mere technicians trying to extend life at all costs."

By listening to patients, says Kerr, "dying becomes less about death than about life's resilience."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[What Deathbed Visions Teach Us About Living.](#) *New York Times*

[End-of-Life Experiences.](#) *Hospice & Palliative Care–Buffalo*

[End-of-Life Dreams and Visions as Perceived by Palliative Care Professionals: A Qualitative Study.](#) *Cambridge Core*

[As Death Approaches, Our Dreams Offer Comfort, Reconciliation.](#) *The Conversation*

[End-of-Life Dreams.](#) *Commonweal*

Applying the News Story

On the [End-of-Life Experiences](#) page of the Hospice & Palliative Care–Buffalo website is this statement: "We originally used the term 'end-of-life dreams and visions' when conducting our research, but we have found that the phrase 'dreams and visions' doesn't properly reflect the vivid nature of these experiences, which feel very real to the patient. We have chosen to instead begin using the more encompassing term 'end-of-life experiences' as, for these patients and their caregivers, these experiences are real, meaningful and significant."

In [2 Corinthians 12:1-7](#), Paul describes visions and revelations of the Lord he experienced in similar terms. Paul didn't know whether these were bodily or out-of-body experiences. He says he "was caught up into paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat."

[On the day of Pentecost](#), when the Holy Spirit fell upon the disciples with fire and opened their mouths to declare the news about Jesus, onlookers were baffled because all of them heard the message in their own language. By way of explanation, Peter referenced Joel's prophecy about the coming day of the Lord ([Joel 2:28-29](#)): God would pour out his Spirit upon all flesh, men and women, even of the lowest slave caste; young men would see visions, and old men would dream dreams.

Dr. Timothy E. Quill, an expert on palliative care medicine at the University of Rochester Medical Center, says medical professionals typically steer clear of discussions about end-of-life experiences because "we don't know what ... they are."

"The huge challenge of this work is to help patients feel more normal and less alone during this unusual experience of dying," Quill adds.

Our discussion focuses on how our faith can help us face our own experiences with death and dying with a sense of peace and security.

The Big Questions

1. Do you know anyone who has had an end-of-life experience (ELE)? Who or what did that person meet in that experience? Was the experience comforting or distressing to the dying person? To those left behind?
2. Have you had any dreams or visions of a spiritual nature that brought you comfort or courage? Have you told anyone about them? Why or why not?

3. What issues might be raised for someone as they witness another person dying?
4. Would you consider having a trained companion sit beside you near the end of your life? Why or why not?
5. How can we provide space for the dying to tell their stories and explore existential or spiritual questions about the meaning of their lives?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Numbers 12:6

And he said, "Hear my words:

When there are prophets among you,

I the LORD make myself known to them in visions;

I speak to them in dreams." (For context, read [Numbers 12:6-8](#).)

Job 33:14-15

[Elihu said,] "For God speaks in one way

and in two, though people do not perceive it.

In a dream, in a vision of the night,

when deep sleep falls on mortals,

while they slumber on their beds ... (For context, read [Job 33:12-18](#).)

Daniel 7:13-14

As I watched in the night visions,

I saw one like a human being

coming with the clouds of heaven.

And he came to the Ancient One

and was presented before him.

To him was given dominion

and glory and kingship,

*that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him.*

His dominion is an everlasting dominion

that shall not pass away,

and his kingship is one

that shall never be destroyed. (For context, read [Daniel 7:9-14](#).)

From these passages we learn that God sometimes reveals himself to people in visions and speaks to them in dreams. Elihu tells Job God speaks this way to warn people to turn from their evil deeds and to "keep them from pride, to spare their souls from the Pit" -- perhaps a metaphor for sin and death (Job 33:16-18).

Questions: Can you think of other Bible passages that tell about God speaking to people in dreams and visions? For what other purposes does God speak to people this way?

Matthew 17:2-3, 6-7

And [Jesus] was transfigured before [Peter, James, and John], and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ... When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." (For context, read [Matthew 17:1-13, 22-23](#).)

This passage describes the transfiguration of Christ on a high mountain. Another way to describe it might be as an end-of-life experience for Jesus. While his death did not occur immediately after this incident, visions like these can happen anytime prior to death, according to Dr. Kerr. But the encounter with Moses and Elijah, who lived centuries earlier, fits the pattern of Kerr's patients who see and/or hear people who have already died.

We don't know what Jesus discussed with Moses and Elijah. Presumably they talked about the events to come, which Jesus described only a few verses later: his betrayal, murder and resurrection (vv. 22-23).

A voice from the cloud also spoke, saying: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased" (v. 5).

The disciples reacted with fear and distress, but the experience seems to have bolstered Jesus' own sense of peace, courage and assurance. He emphasized that he would be raised from the dead (vv. 9, 23). Jesus was so strengthened that he was even able to reassure his disciples that there was no need to fear.

Questions: What was it about the encounter with Moses and Elijah that brought Jesus comfort and hope? What was the significance of the encounter for the disciples?

Acts 7:55-56, 59-60

But filled with the Holy Spirit, [Stephen] gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" ... While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died. (For context, read [Acts 7:54-60](#).)

After deacon Stephen's powerful witness about Jesus (vv. 2-53), the members of the council became enraged and began to stone him. Stephen appears to have had an end-of-life vision that gave him Christ-like courage and compassion that could only come from the power of the Holy Spirit at work within him.

Questions: What was the significance for Stephen of the particular image of the heavens opened? Of Jesus standing at the right hand of God?

Hebrews 12:1-2

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (For context, read [Hebrews 11:29–12:2](#).)

In the chapter preceding this text, the author curates heroes of faith from biblical history and sacred literature who have finished their time on earth and crossed over to the next life. These figures are not depicted as corpses, but rather appear as a great cloud of witnesses, watching and cheering from the grandstands for those still in the race of faith here on earth.

Questions: What people who have died would you like to see watching and rooting for you from the sidelines as you seek to run the race set before you? Why those particular people? When you cross your own finish line at the end of this life and take your place among the great cloud of witnesses, whom will you be watching, and for whom will you be cheering?

For Further Discussion

1. Reflect on this: The theme of end-of-life experiences is prominent in Episode 17 of Season 6 in the family saga *This Is Us*. The Pearson family gathers to bid farewell to an unconscious Rebecca, the matriarch, who suffered from Alzheimer's in her later years.

One by one, her children and their spouses and children enter her room

to tell her what she has meant to them, as she dreams of riding on a train with loved ones who have preceded her in death. As she moves through the train cars, Rebecca hears words of affirmation from those whose lives she has touched in spite of her flaws. Dr. Katowsky, the obstetrician who delivered her triplets, remarks about her determination to persevere through the loss of a child and a husband and says she deserves a rest after creating a "big, messy, spectacular" life out of the cards she was dealt. Her deceased second husband, Miguel, tells her she's still his favorite person.

The conductor guiding Rebecca through the train toward the caboose, which metaphorically represents the end of her life, is her adopted son's biological father, William. During her final hours of life, Rebecca ponders the meaning of her life, telling William how sad she feels. But her end-of-life companion, William, who had died of cancer many years before, responds, "The end is not sad. It's just the start of the next incredibly beautiful thing."

When Rebecca arrives at the door to the last car, she insists she can't enter yet because she's waiting for someone. It's her daughter Kate, who was overseas when she learned of Rebecca's decline. Once Kate arrives and reunites with her two brothers, Rebecca feels free to finish her own journey into the afterlife. She opens the door to the caboose, where she finds a comfortable bed. When she lies down, she turns over to see her first love and husband Jack beside her. Now they can both rest in peace together.

Actor Mandy Moore (who played the matriarch Rebecca), commented in an interview, "There is something so almost psychedelic about this idea at the end of our lives to be able to have the opportunity to see different iterations of the people that we love, and have a chance for them to say something to us and for us to say something to them, and to have this very natural sort of exchange of love. ... Maybe there is this silver lining of her brain placing her on this train with the only thing that mattered in her life, which were the people that she loved. And this is really her legacy, it's her

family. And how she helped form them."

Moore remarked, "I have to subscribe to William's theory: If things are sad when they're ending, it's only because they were beautiful while they were happening."

2. Discuss this, from writer James Baldwin: "Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death -- ought to decide, indeed, to earn one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible for life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return."

3. Consider and discuss this: Although Kerr and other researchers have not noted the appearance of religious figures in many end-of-life experiences they document, some people have reported transformative visitations from Jesus [throughout history](#) and [even in recent times](#). While we are not in a position to independently confirm such reports, we are not able to deny them either.

[John 14:1-3, 18](#), which is often read at Christian memorial services, contains the words of Jesus to his disciples, spoken hours before his death. Here Jesus assures the disciples that while they are temporarily physically separated from each other, during that time Jesus will be preparing a place where they can live together again. He promises to return and bring them with him to his Father's house.

While most of the disciples lived many more years before their own

deaths, these words of Jesus may well have brought them comfort and courage, knowing that he would accompany them when their time came.

4. Ponder this: On one occasion, Kerr went above and beyond the call of duty to facilitate a dying cancer patient's wishes to attend Christmas Eve Mass and spend time at home. When a reporter asked Kerr why he had gone to such lengths to help, Kerr replied simply: "Sometimes the best medicine is not medicine."

Paul Lauritzen, a widower who is writing a memoir with the working title *Looking Backward, Living Forward: Reflections on Love, Loss, and Renewal*, remarked that "it may be more accurate to say that sometimes the best medicine is not medicine as it has come to be practiced outside hospice."

John Tangeman, the administrative medical director of Hospice Buffalo, said, "Being a hospice doctor is doctoring in its purest form. It is old-style doctoring, which involves listening both to the patient and to his or her body."

Lauritzen wrote, "I came to see the stethoscope that was always around Kerr's neck less as a diagnostic tool than as a symbol of how he sees his role as a physician caring for the dying. He is at the bedside to listen to his patients -- and not just to their heart and lungs. He is there to listen to the story of their lives."

5. Think about this, from French Renaissance writer Michel de Montaigne: "He who should teach men to die would at the same time teach them to live." Do you agree? Why or why not?

6. As stated in the "Applying the News Story" section above, Dr. Timothy E. Quill, a board member of the Death with Dignity National Center in Portland, Oregon, said: "The huge challenge of this work is to help patients feel more

normal and less alone during this unusual experience of dying." In what sense is the experience of dying "unusual"? In what sense is it *not* unusual?

Responding to the News

For an interview with Dr. Kerr, featuring stories from patients and family members, check out [Death Is But a Dream 2022 \(Video 1:23:48\)](#) on the Elisabeth Kübler Ross Foundation YouTube channel. For a TedxBuffalo Talk by Dr. Kerr, watch [I See Dead People: Dreams and Visions of the Dying \(Video 17:26\)](#).

Prayer suggested by [Psalm 56:13](#); [Psalm 116:8](#); [2 Corinthians 1:3-4](#)

Creator God, who delivers our soul from death, our eyes from tears, and our feet from stumbling, so that we may walk before you in the light of life: Shine the light of hope in Christ upon us, and through us, bring comfort and peace to those in distress. By the power of your Spirit. Amen.

Copyright 2024 Communication Resources