

Journey to the Edge: Faith and Near-Death Experiences

Part 2: Crossing Over

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Scripture: 2 Peter 3:9; 1 Corinthians 15:22; John 12:32

In the opening scene of the Netflix series "The Good Place," Eleanor Shellstrop, played by Kristen Bell, finds herself in "The Good Place" after dying in a freak accident. A spirit being named Michael, played by Ted Danson, invites her into his office to introduce her to the next realm. Knowing her past behavior, Eleanor is shocked to find herself there, but Michael reassures her that she led a life worthy of admission. Later, Eleanor learns that a mistake has been made. She has been confused with another Eleanor Shellstrop who lived a selfless and virtuous life! The first season humorously follows Eleanor as she attempts a crash course in virtue to avoid being discovered.

In the opening scene of the series, Eleanor asks Michael a question that many NDE experiencers themselves ask if their experience includes an encounter with God, Jesus, or another divine being. She asks, "Who is right? I mean about all of this?"

Michael responds, "Well, let's see ... Hindus are a little bit right, Muslims a little bit, Jews, Christians, Buddhists ... every religion guessed about five percent. Except for Doug Forcett."

"Who is Doug Forcett?" Eleanor queries.

Michael explains, "Doug was a stoner kid in Calgary during the 1970s. One night he got really high on mushrooms and his best friend Randy said, 'Hey, what do you think happens after we die?' and Doug just launched into this long monologue where he got like 92% correct. We couldn't believe what we were hearing!"

The scene then cuts to a 1970s-era photo of a starry-eyed, bushy-haired young man. Michael points to the photo and says, "That's him actually right there. He's pretty famous around here. I'm very lucky to have that."

While "The Good Place" does not accurately represent the afterlife described by those who have Near-Death Experiences (NDEs), one aspect of this opening scene does capture something that rings true in light of NDE reports.

Having read scores of books and listened to numerous podcasts about NDEs in the last couple of years, I've found that people who have crossed over to the "other side" offer a great deal of evidence to suggest that each of the world's great religions gets significantly more than five percent right. Taken as a whole, they even rival Doug Forcett!

NDEs themselves operate a bit like the world religions. The accounts are quite varied, even as each has its own integrity and cohesiveness. Yet a dozen or so elements recur frequently across these experiences, regardless of religious affiliation (or lack thereof), or age, gender, or cultural background. Taken together, these common elements confirm what the world's perennial spiritual traditions have been telling us for centuries. So much so, in fact, that I and others increasingly suspect that the religions themselves have been informed by ancient NDEs.

One of the reasons why I have a special interest in this topic – besides the fact that I'm a minister – is that the picture these common elements paint is quite hopeful. Who couldn't use a little more hope right about now?

Another reason for my interest is that they reflect exactly what I would expect a God who loves us all beyond our wildest imagination to create in the Universe. For me, this means there is a great deal of coherence between NDE accounts and the profoundly mystical experience I had simultaneously with a friend in 1981, that I've talked about before.¹

Speaking of this experience, one further reason for my strong interest in NDEs is that these accounts have helped me resolve a conundrum that has always bothered me about my 1981 experience. In the experience, it was crystal clear that God really does love us all beyond our wildest imagination, and that God is not only aware of us but far more aware of us than we are aware of ourselves. I also came away with a deep and abiding sense of the "okay-ness" of the world how the world operates. While I've had no trouble accepting the love God has for us, and God's awareness of us, I have always struggled to accept the deep "okay-ness" that was so clear in the experience.

How can this world, with all its injustice, suffering, and sin, be "okay"? Frankly, how can even my own sin be "okay" with God (not to mention yours)? Yet this is what I experienced. You, me, and this world are all okay. My head has always been unable to reconcile with what my heart knows to be true.

When I consider the common elements of NDE experiences, however, what I find is that they reveal not only something quite special about the afterlife but something just as special about *this* life. They help me conceive of how everything will not only be alright after we die, but it is already alright now. At least it's alright when you realize that this life and the next are intimately connected and that our present life is not a destination but part of a much longer, and greater, journey.

Incidentally, I don't expect you to agree with me right now. And of course, it's fine if you and I never agree. I just hope you'll hear me out without dismissing my point of view until after you've considered it. Some of this won't become clear until we complete the remaining two weeks.

¹ See the Addendum to my Pentecost sermon on May 19th.

Leaving the question of the “okay-ness” of our present world aside for the moment, let’s consider the “okay-ness” we can expect to experience in the next, according to the common elements of NDEs.²

- We can expect freedom from pain and suffering, coupled with a sense of deepest peace and acceptance of our path.
- We can expect to experience a sense of truly being loved beyond our wildest imagination by a Presence who has not only been aware of us throughout this life but far more aware of us than we have been of ourselves.
- We can expect to experience a comprehensive life review. One in which our entire life appears before us – the good, the bad, and the ugly. I’ll have much more to say about this next week, but for now, I’ll note that we will experience certain events from multiple perspectives. That is, we’ll see how our actions and behavior on earth impacted the lives of those around us for better or worse. While this review will not be entirely rosy, we will experience it without any sense of being judged or condemned by our Creator.
- We can also expect to enter a Realm that is like earth yet is so much more vivid, colorful, and wonder-full that no earthly words can adequately describe it. People speak of stepping into lush gardens or peaceful forests. Many speak of the natural elements such as grass or water as having consciousness and even the ability to communicate with us in their own unique way. Plenty speak of seeing or entering a shining city or town. These places tend to be inhabited by many other souls happily conversing with one another or working together on various tasks.
- Dale and the choir will be happy to know that we can expect to hear a great deal of music! Music unlike anything we have ever heard before, often coming from spiritual beings or even nature itself. As a preacher, I find it interesting that other forms of communication in the afterlife take place wordlessly, through some form of telepathy. So you don’t hear words, but you do hear music. No wonder music is such a vital part of worship in our realm. You musicians give us a foretaste of the next!
- Less surprising, but equally encouraging, we can expect to encounter loved ones in the next realm. Friends and relatives who have passed on. Brothers, sisters, parents. While NDEers almost never speak of encountering anyone they shared no love connection with in this life, my strong assumption is that their absence

² You’ll find an excellent summary and analysis of these common elements in *Crossover Experience: Life After Death – 100 Exceptional Near Death Experiences* (Project Shift, 2022). This book is co-authored by a leading NDE researcher who is also a prominent cardiologist (Pim van Lommel, M.D.); an award-winning documentary filmmaker and best-selling author who is also a quantum economist who specializes in processing large data sets (DJ Kadagian); and a leading authority on near-death experiences across cultures and throughout history (Gregory Shushan, Ph.D.). This book provides a series of first-hand NDE accounts of these common characteristics, followed by analysis and commentary by the three authors, using the tools of their particular disciplines.

can be attributed to the limitations of the NDE experience itself. We have to remember that, in an NDE, a person's time of the afterlife is cut short. They don't experience the "whole enchilada." Just the first taste. From the accounts of cities full of people, my guess is that these cities are filled with more than those we know and love. Only, if we encounter those who made us uncomfortable in this life, I also assume these people have had a transformational experience like our own in the next. We may find them more loveable than we ever expected, and they may find the same in us. In any case, I'm sure there's a reason why Jesus stressed loving our enemies so much!

- Curiously, one person that very few people report seeing in an NDE is their spouse. This may be good news to some of you! Yet, a spouse's absence is especially surprising since many NDEers are of an age where they have been predeceased by their spouse. Again, I think that a spouse's absence only underscores the limitations of NDEs. If you and your spouse have deeply loved one another, I have a very hard time believing that you would *not* encounter each other. Yet, it makes sense that meeting your spouse would come later, after a bit of preparation – perhaps even delicious anticipation. Another reason I suspect that spouses don't appear at first is because...
- We can expect that our thoughts and feelings will be fully transparent to those we meet in the afterlife. People regularly speak of friends, loved ones, and other spiritual beings who know exactly what is on their minds and respond to it accordingly. As I mentioned, telepathy seems to be the primary mode of communication, which would require knowledge of someone's inner state. As you can imagine, it might be better to meet a spouse once you've worked through a few of those inner thoughts and memories – and perhaps experienced a fair amount of grace and lack of judgment – before your insides are revealed so transparently to a spouse!
- One of the most common elements we can expect to encounter is Light. Light that doesn't shine *upon* things so much as *within* things. We can also expect to encounter a special light or many special lights. Lights that are not simply bright but radiate loving awareness. Many people interpret this light or a figure standing within the light as God or Jesus or Mohammed or an angel or other extraordinary spiritual being. Who they think this person or entity is seems to be colored by their prior beliefs.

Finally, as a Christian, I find it reassuring that quite a lot of people speak of encountering Jesus on the "other side" – even those whose beliefs or lack of belief would naturally predispose them to believing this figure to be anyone *but* Jesus! An atheist, agnostic, Jew, or Buddhist seems as likely to encounter Jesus as anyone else. In fact, this happens so often that one non-Christian podcaster who regularly interviews

NDE experiencers has commented, almost with a note of exasperation, “Jesus seems to be quite busy in the next realm!”³

As you may guess, when someone experiences Jesus in the next realm, one of the most common questions is exactly what Eleanor Shellstrop asked Michael in "The Good Place": “Which is the ‘true’ religion?” Another common question is, “Why do we exist?”

Curiously, the Jesus that people encounter tends to be much more affirming of other faith paths than most Christians on earth seem to be! The most common answer to the question of who’s right is that there are many paths to God, but at their core, they are the same. In other words, Jesus appears to be a Christian Pluralist! Really, why would we expect otherwise when he clearly said, “I have other sheep who are not of this fold” (John 10:16) and “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32)?

In answer to the second question about why we exist, the most common answer is that we exist simply to love one another.

As one NDE researcher puts it, “Two important questions, one clear and simple answer. It always comes back to love.”⁴

It always comes back to love.

Almost to a person, NDE experiencers re-enter this world feeling that their primary purpose is to use the time that remains to love others without judgment and that no single religion or spiritual tradition can get us to heaven. Wouldn’t you feel this way if you experienced the Realm I have been describing for yourself?

In this respect, NDE accounts can teach us as much or more about *this* life than the next. It’s like Jesus actually meant what he said when he invited us to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. It’s like he knew what he was talking about when he commended us not to judge others and to love and do good even to our enemies. It’s almost like he hit the nail on the head when he invited us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth as it is in heaven.*”

Psalms 23 seems to have got the whole thing right, too, when it affirms, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul ... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint

³ Alex Ferrari, *Next Level Soul Podcast*. I’ve heard Alex make this comment more than once. Incidentally, Alex’s podcast includes interviews with many people who claim to have had a wide variety of spiritual experiences – not just NDEs. I find some of these NDEs and other experiences to be quite believable. I’m highly skeptical of others. If you’re feeling adventurous – and discerning – you might want to visit www.nextlevelsoul.com.

⁴ KJ Kadagian, *Crossover Experience*, p. 260.

my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

So, in conclusion, what can we take from all of this? As we journey to the edge of faith and near-death experiences, we find that the common elements of NDEs not only offer a hopeful picture of the afterlife but also provide profound insights into how we should live our lives here and now. They remind us that our purpose is to love one another deeply and without judgment, that our actions have far-reaching impacts, and that our spiritual journey is interconnected with the lives of those around us.

May we embrace these lessons with open hearts and minds, allowing them to guide us in our daily lives, bringing us closer to the divine love that transcends all understanding. Amen.