

Introduction

"Near-death-experiences - do I know anything about it? Of course! Isn't it something to do with a tunnel, or something? There was something on TV recently though. ... Maybe there is something to it, who knows?" This is the kind of reaction you get from very many people, were you to ask them about such experiences. Perhaps it all gets even more emphatic: "Never heard anything about it!" Or: "Do you mean this weird nonsense, I read about in the papers the other day? Keep away from me with that kind of thing. Dead is dead. You can't change anything about that!" Intuitive agreement will also be a possible reaction and one or other book title will be mentioned, maybe also an experience. Maybe one meets well informed people. All of the above I have encountered repeatedly over the last years.

For many years I have been interested in the questions about the "final things". Much of this has to do with my biography. When I was three years old my father fell in the war. I lost my mother at 16. Again and again, even as a child, I questioned the sense behind such happenings and I could hardly make any sense of it at all. I then studied theology/religious science and philosophy. As I began teaching religion in 1968, I was, to my own surprise, repeatedly asked about eschatological, apocalyptic themes. Does a soul exist and is it possible for it to be immortal?

These were very important topics for my pupils. Such things were considered existential by these still young people. It's just that, during my theological and also philosophical studies I had to learn other things in large amounts. Those considerations were hardly mentioned then, and with the technical theological terms, which were sometimes mentioned in lectures or seminars, I could hardly reach anyone. So I went searching, read books by the psychologist C.G. Jung; also Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' books "Interviews with the dying" and "What more can we do?" were devoured by me. So I finally came to the, then notably US, literature about near-death-experiences. Here I found sentiments, which came very near to what I wanted to say in religious - and later also in philosophy - lectures about the topic of the end of a person's life on earth. Of how much help this should all be to me, I recognized first when my twin brother died of a brain tumor in 1990.

The state of knowledge, even today, on the topic of near-death-experiences is by and large not very deep and above all not so clear as one would expect from the number of books and other texts - with largely varying standards, though - which have been published on the subject. Supposedly we are living in a time of no taboos. When it comes to borderline situations, like the boundary at the end of life and all the questions that go along with it, people tend to listen with one ear only, forget fast, and hardly ever think things through. This means that suppression is happening and to a very large extent.

Sometimes I have been asked to give a lecture on near-death-experiences, and it was occasionally hinted to leave the word "death" out of the title, because it would not be very popular on posters and maybe even frighten people off. Surely this is in some way

understandable. Especially with a cruel stroke of fate, as for example, when the death of a close relative, has not yet been dealt with, and it is feared that the wounds, which have just begun to heal, will be torn open again. Who would wish to take responsibility for that? Were it not better to wait until the healing process has taken its course and to try not to think about that which has happened?

It can, however, happen differently. Just before one of my presentations the pastor of the community told me he had informed a family, which had just lost a 25 year-old son killed in an accident, of my lecture. Maybe it could be a comfort for them to hear something about experiences of dying. Initially the family was somewhat perturbed at this offer. But, ten minutes before the start, as the mother told me afterwards, she stood up and said "We're **all** going to go." And that's what they did. In the end she admitted to me how happy they all were about the presentation of the considerations. Comfort had actually taken place. This decision of the mourners took courage, but this courage had been worthwhile.

That our earthly existence is finite, and that at some stage the final curtain must be drawn, is seen by some to be a taboo subject, only to be suppressed and forgotten, and by courageous others as something to be recognized and accepted or what will happen, are the two poles between which the topics of death and near-death-experiences play out their notional debate. My intention and desire is, through this book, and with the help of expert explanations, but also through the sympathetic experience of the reported adventures about the dying, which affects all of us in this world, to take apart the tabu zones and with the knowledge of near-death-experiences (NDEs) to create a justified hope that, namely, life is more than simply a guest-appearance on this small Earth.

Further I would like to show that there are different approaches to this theme, which can certainly be differently assessed.

The last part should make it clear, that in many areas of life the knowledge of NDEs is especially necessary. I am thinking here, for example, about a personal orientation of life and a possible change in values and perhaps finding a new purpose in life.

Work in an hospice, palliative medicine, yes, and every sort of medical or social work can profit from knowledge of near-death-experiences. What is important for me under the aspect of near-death-experiences is the view to every form of education right up to teacher training. This seems to me to be of very great importance especially these days, where in these areas more and more complain about declining values and increasing violence of every form. Last but not least, the approach to one's own fear of living and also to the fear of dying can, through the knowledge of experiences in near-death, be positively affected. Intentions to commit suicide are also significantly reduced. Should such an attempt be made for which spiritual and psychological treatment is needed, the knowledge of experiences in near-death can be especially helpful, as researches in the USA have shown.

One of the most important topics in life, namely, the knowledge about the finality of our earthly existence with all its consequences, now has to be, as far as possible, hauled out of the taboo-zone, out of repression and into the open.