

What would Oliver Sacks say about the afterlife now? | 291 |

by Alex Tsakiris | Oct 19 | Consciousness Science, Near-Death Experience | 0 comments

Near-Death Experience Research, Dr. Jan Holden and her colleagues reveal their latest findings.

skeptiko-oliver-sacks
photo by: Steve Jurvetson

The question might sound crass, but then again, why should it? Dr. Oliver Sacks was one of the world's best known and beloved neuroscientists, but at the time of his passing he was also an outspoken opponent of scientific findings suggestive of an afterlife. So, should a question contemplating a reality he was never willing to consider offend? Our cultural reflex to respect the dead may be trying to tell us something about underlying scientific question — what happens after we die?

Join Alex Tsakiris for an interview with near-death experience researcher and University of North Texas professor, [Dr. Jan Holden](#), author of [The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences](#):

Alex Tsakiris: I was wondering if we could talk about the recent passing of the most famous neurologist of our time, Dr. Oliver Sacks. If anyone remembers the movie “Awakenings” with Robin Williams and Robert DeNiro about this patient who’s experiencing these horrible, neurological conditions — that doctor is really the Oliver Sacks figure.

And I wanted to talk about him because I hear what you are saying... about more people being open to looking at near-death experience science, but I juxtapose that against what mainstream science is saying, and what Oliver Sacks was saying before he passed into that next dimension — NDEs are hallucinations. And they may have some nice language about how those hallucinations are formed, but they’re [still insisting that NDEs are] hallucinations. And I just wonder how much progress we’ve really made because science isn’t done in a vacuum. It’s a social enterprise. It’s a cultural enterprise— it shapes culture and culture shapes it. So this whole [endeavor] of NDE research boils down to NDE researchers and the people doing the science on one side, versus Oliver Sacks and the neurologists and the neuroscientists on the other side. [This is] because NDE science is a direct attack not just on their profession but ultimately on their livelihood... Maybe do ourselves a disservice if we don’t understand and share with other people the extent to which the battle lines are drawn.

Dr. Jan Holden: I’ve wondered too what Oliver Sacks would say now—that he has actually moved into

saying Alex—the mainstream scientific perspective is that consciousness is a product of the brain—such that when the brain dies, consciousness dies. And what near-death research and especially in concert with research of other phenomena like after-death communication, nearing-death awareness, deathbed visions, reincarnation, and so forth. When cardiologists like Dr. Pim van Lommel calls a convergence of evidence, it points to the idea that consciousness exists essentially separate from the brain but of course extremely interrelated with it while we're physically alive. In my view, first of all I think that culture changes slowly and as some famous person said it changes funeral by funeral. So it does take time for a paradigm shift in thinking to occur.

But you said something that I find really interesting: neuroscientists and so forth seemed threatened by this information. I do understand them feeling threatened in the sense that we're always threatened when our fundamental beliefs are challenged. But on the other hand, there is no reason for scientists and other medical people to be threatened by the idea that consciousness is essentially independent of the brain because from that perspective the brain is seen as a source of limitation. It's a filter on what actually is our bigger capability, and that filter is critical. If I've had a stroke, I want a neurosurgeon who knows a lot about how the brain works to help me regain as much as my brain function as possible because I can't access my consciousness while my body is alive. I shouldn't say can't—my capacity to access my consciousness is very limited based to a great extent on what my brain is capable of. So there is still a place for all the science and scientific discoveries and all that's needed for managing the brain and maximizing its ability to access the consciousness for which the brain serves as kind of a cell phone. So it would be like saying that just because you discover that the message coming to you on the cell phone doesn't originate on the cell phone then cell phone repairers should feel threatened? I don't think so because I still need the cell phone to get the message.

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Alex Tsakiris: You just mentioned that you see a gap in the near-death experience research when it comes to, for example, Shiite religious people in Iran. What do you think is the nature of that gap in the Muslim community in general in terms of this near-death experience research? Why is it there? How is it there?

Ali Ghasemiannejad: There are only two of three articles that are publishable—most of them NDEs; and the participants only [were] five or ten. So I started to interview Muslim Shiite NDE-ers. More than 50 maybe. And I established a website [to] educate people about Muslim NDE-ers. It was the first time they heard about NDEs. I think our professors and researchers in Iran don't know about NDEs, unfortunately. And when I wanted to start the research there wasn't anybody to help me and I had communication with professors from the United States or other countries that conducted research about NDEs. And if you look at articles [or] books, you can see that there is a lack of attention to Muslim NDEs, especially Shiite. There are no articles about Shiite Muslim NDEs and the majority of Iran is Shiite Muslim—more than 80% are Shiite Muslim. So I think it can be helpful to investigate to help us understand about the nature of NDEs from different cultures.

[easy-tweet tweet="Dr. Jan Holden... NDE research, the passing of Oliver Sacks, and Muslim NDEs"]

Alex Tsakiris: I just had an interview with Dr. Evan Thompson, a philosopher from the University of British Columbia—very prominent in the NDE debate circles—always taking the other side, the neurological model because that's also his background. [He's] well-versed in the near-death experience literature. He's written a book directly challenging Dr. Pim van Lommel. I also interviewed a couple years ago Yale neurologist Dr. Steven Novella. Again, this is Yale. This is supposed to be one of the most highly-regarded institutions in the country. I directly addressed with him how his neurological model doesn't fit the data. Again, let's understand each other and understand where these guys are coming from. One of the words and phrases they like to kick around is the "neural substrates of emotion." They'll say things like, "All of these experiences...they're fantastic. They're wonderful but there's a neurological basis if we really get down to the heart of it." Then when you push them like I did [with] Novella, you say, okay Steve, look at the research of Dr. Jeffrey Long. Hundreds and hundreds of near-death experiencers...92% are experiencing deceased relatives and only deceased relatives, no one who's living. You're going to tell me there's some aspect of the brain, some little neuron we can put our finger on that says you're having this kind of experience, therefore let's only key up and create these hallucinations with deceased people. It's a bizarre notion and yet that's what these people are advancing. But they're not advancing it in a vacuum they're advancing it in direct response to the research that you guys are generating. So maybe I'm pushing this too hard but I don't think I am. I think the battle lines are drawn a lot deeper than we think, and a lot deeper than the near-death research community wants to acknowledge. I don't think we can dismiss these people as just uninformed [or] they haven't really read the research. They're just attacking the research because it's in their interest to do so.

Dr. Jan Holden: I think what you're saying is accurate. Some people are familiar with the research yet still disregard some aspects of it. I think there's selective attention to aspects that they feel capable of criticizing. And I have yet to hear an explanation of any kind of veridical perception. How people—numerous cases of people who based on the condition and position of their physical body shouldn't have been able to perceive what they report having perceived that is later investigated and found to be accurate. I just don't know of a way to account for something like that in a hallucination model. And I almost have a hard time even giving the hallucination model any credibility because so

death experiences. And so it's hard for me to understand how someone could still hold that position. But I think it's selective. I think to step back though, the only thing I can think to do is continue to research; continue to look at all of the evidence; have faith that [what] seems to have happened in the past when there was resistance to new ideology because of a well-established existing ideology, eventually the weight of the evidence shifted and what was once heresy is almost know thoughtlessly accepted.

Alex Tsakiris: If you're really going to advance that Ali does this work with the Iranian Shia and they have a similar experience. And Natasha reports from New Zealand as have so many other researchers across cultures. If you're really going to jam that back into a neurological model, buddy you better have some pretty convincing evidence because it just doesn't make any sense that could trace back to some neural correlates. I don't see how that could work.

Natasha Tassell-Matamua: I'll just jump in here. In my other incarnation, the thing that I teach is cultural psychology and that's why I'm quite big on the cultural stuff and the cultural question. But what we do know is people from different cultures process information differently. So just looking at cognitive processing, we know that people from more individualistic cultures tend to have a more analytical style of processing whereas people from more holistic cultures seem to process more holistically. So when we're looking at the neurological model we know that the cognitive processing information systems that people have [correlate] to the culture that they're from. So the fact that we're finding some sort of universality or appear to be finding some universality I guess is in many ways a contradiction to what we know about cognitive processing. So I guess it's a starting point for saying there's something more going on than just the underlying neurological basis. Because you would think from what we know that cognitive processing styles are different cross-culturally. So just based on the evidence you would think that perhaps NDEs should also differ just given the fact that people—given it's a psychological experience—people would psychologically process them in different ways in different cultures and yet as far as we know, we're not finding that.

Alex Tsakiris: Ali, one of the papers you recently presented at the recent IANDS Conference was on the elements of near-death experiences in the Koran. As you show in the paper, there are many references that either directly or indirectly refer to some of the aspects that we commonly understand as being part of the near-death experience. So do you think that's going to be surprising to Muslims?

Ali Ghasemiannejad: Absolutely. We are going to publish an article both in Iran—in Persian philosophical journals. They encourage me to do this so I think it would be a surprising thing for people in Iran—Muslim people in Iran—they [would] like it. Because I don't know or not the [30 percent] of verses in the Koran talks about death and after death. It's wonderful for them to [contemplate] subjective psychological phenomena of NDEs based on their beliefs, so maybe it can be [taken as] empirical evidence of survival after death.

Alex Tsakiris: Jan, tell us a little bit about this other paper that you sent me, [Disclosing Near-Death](#)

Dr. Jan Holden: For the [psychospiritual] potential to be blocked because of an ignorantly based response to what [NDE experiencers] experience just seems really tragic to me.

Alex Tsakiris: What are one or two of the most important things you feel you could tell a healthcare professional about how to handle this situation—particularly if they’re not convinced of the reality of this? Or they’re somewhat aware of the near-death experience research but it just doesn’t fit in with their belief system. What advice would you give them for how to approach this in a Do No Harm basis?

Dr. Jan Holden: I’ll reiterate the points I made before: The things that seem to make for a helpful response are to know and name the experience; really say to the experiencer it sounds like you may have had a near-death experience—and give the experience a name because as well known as NDEs are, a lot of people aren’t aware of them. Or they think that they’re...not all NDEs involve a tunnel—moving through a tunnel toward a light, only about 20% do. And what they may not realize what they experienced was an NDE.

Alex Tsakiris: So even if I think it’s a hallucination of your mind I can still at least acknowledge that this is a medically recognized phenomena that we call near-death experience; and I can name it so that’s going to help that patient. That’s number one right?

Dr. Jan Holden: Right. That’s going to be a help. Another thing is whether or not you personally believe that the experience is real, most near-death experiencers are adamant that experience was real. Unlike dreams and hallucinations, when people return to normal consciousness after those experiences they look back on the experience and say, as real as it felt at the time I now know that it wasn’t real. In near-death experiences, people look back on the NDE and they still say, absolutely, that was real. And so just accepting that it’s phenomenologically real to the NDE-er; and also if they want to be open to research that the research points to accurate perceptions when the person was completely incapacitated...that really do point to the potential reality of the experience.

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