



Is Heaven Real? Heaven Knows!

A Review of

Heaven Is for Real (2014)

by Randall Wallace (Director)

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Reviewed by

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Heaven Is for Real presents the true story of a four-year-old boy in Nebraska who reported to his parents that he visited heaven under anesthesia during a life-threatening operation. The boy did not flatline during the operation, making it technically difficult to classify his memories as a near-death experience (NDE). Yet his reported memories share so many features with NDEs that most reports about the film call the boy's experience an NDE; given the similarities, it is not unlikely that his experiences arose from neurochemical events similar to those in NDEs.

NDEs have been written about repeatedly since the 1980s, when they first became publicly known. A Medline search for peer-reviewed articles published between 1980 and 2014 revealed 314,863 articles containing the words *near death experience*. Yet, despite all that has been written about NDEs, reliable scientific research on this phenomenon does not exist, leaving most researchers agreeing that NDEs are as yet unexplained (Agrillo, 2011). In the absence of a scientific understanding, various theories to elucidate NDEs have been suggested, but none yet accounts for all the features of NDEs. Thus, what the scientific community knows is that NDEs occur relatively commonly, but what causes them is beyond our understanding at this time.

With this paucity of reliable information in mind, it would be heartening to report that the film *Heaven Is for Real*, which has been seen by more than nine million people thus far in the United States, adds to our understanding of NDEs. But this is not the case. *Heaven Is for Real* is a quaint story that will convince few skeptics that NDEs are anything more than the neurochemical products of the human brain in duress. Nonetheless, this hope-filled film will likely delight those who already believe in the supernatural dimension of NDEs or in the reality of nonobservable spiritual phenomena, as well as those who like to entertain such possibilities.

Of what relevance, then, is this film to modern psychologists? Perhaps in two ways. First, a minor but notable character in the film, Charlotte Slater (played by Nancy Sorel), is a psychologist, a university professor with expertise on NDEs. The portrayal of this character sadly reinforces stereotypes about psychologists: the extremely well-appointed, even regal, office, equipped with black leather couches, elegantly dim lighting, and a massive wooden desk; the psychologist's personal experience with the death of her husband, which led her

to study NDEs yet also to a cynical life devoid of spiritual beliefs; and her surprising healing or conversion at the end of the movie, when she shows up at the boy's church to hear his father's testimony.

However, no hint is provided in the story line to connect the psychologist's earlier cynicism with her later conversion. What happened to her? What did she learn over the months? Surely, Medline tells us that there was no new or stunning scientific evidence to change her judgment about NDEs. Yet, knowing about her journey might have been very valuable to those viewers whose judgments are framed primarily by scientific data.

Slater's story could have become a vehicle for introducing some of the intriguing scientific evidence that favors the existence of the supernatural, such as studies suggesting the efficacy of intercessory prayer (Brown, 2012), those revealing that human thoughts appear capable of altering significantly the distribution of machine-generated random numbers (Chang, 2003), or reports of the uncanny knowledge obtained by those who have experienced NDEs (Thonnard et al., 2013). Slater might have expressed compassion, rather than implicit judgment, for the boy's father, who sought her out for objective information and might in fact have been open to counseling regarding his son's NDE, following the best available clinical guidelines for this particular work (Griffith, 2009). But because viewers learn nothing of Slater's journey or the knowledge that she presumably possesses about NDEs, one could conclude that this film missed an opportunity to inform and engage those who are not already believers.

Presumably, then, the director's intent was not to convince skeptics of anything spiritual. One concludes, then, that his intent was to tell a story mostly to those who already believe and that he essentially dismissed the scientific community—as represented by the psychologist—as so many cynics in need of conversion. This one-dimensional portrayal of the psychology profession and the scientific community was disappointing.

The second reason this film may be relevant to psychologists pertains to particular characters—Nancy Rawling and Jay Wilkins. These 50-something elders in the church, along with other church members, are distressed that their pastor's son claims to have gone to heaven. Their main concern is that if the boy's experiences are real, then heaven is real; by implication, then, they would need to be taking their religion and its beliefs a lot more seriously than they have so far. They might actually have to act as though they really believed in the supernatural. To the social scientist looking in, this behavior from elders and church members tells a potent story about religion in America in recent decades.

The church where the events in this film are set is located in rural Imperial, Nebraska, in the heart of the Bible Belt. This is the part of the United States where, on the basis of demographic data, one would likely find the greatest concentration of churchgoers and a culture presumably more comfortable with the supernatural than one finds on our coasts and in urban areas (Barna, 2012). Instead, the film conveys that in such a church many people are attending primarily for social reasons and that the elders and the pastor are challenged profoundly by the possibility that what they profess might be real. This suggests that postmodern thinking, material pursuits, and other rational, earthly matters may have largely eclipsed the transcendent dimension of mainstream Christian religion even in our nation's most religious region.

Such a state of affairs may reveal the sheer extent of the cultural changes that have taken place in America during the past few decades, begging the question: Are the "sides" of the

culture war perhaps closer to one another in worldview than some pundits would have us believe (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2010)? This is an intriguing possibility for social and political scientists to explore in greater depth, revealed less perhaps from the data about church attendance and professed beliefs and more from data about the effects of religion on actual human behavior.

In short, regardless of the media attention and controversy that *Heaven Is for Real* has received since its release in April 2014, this film adds little to our knowledge of NDEs and related phenomena. It reinforces stereotypical depictions of scientists, thus potentially maintaining rather than bridging the oft-discussed cultural divide between religious and nonreligious persons. It fails to bring scientific information about NDEs to the general public and does not explore the complex questions that NDEs or the possible existence of souls have raised for bioethicists (Disilvestro, 2012).

The film's primary positive contribution to the field of psychology involves the subtle and perhaps unintended messages that it conveys about the potential loss of real-world relevance and daily vibrancy among people of faith, even in America's most religious areas. As such, the film serves as a valuable study of the role that religion may play in our highly materialistic, mechanized, technological, and scientific world. For these reasons, this film is most likely to be relevant to those who are interested in the psychology or sociology of religion and to those who themselves have active spiritual beliefs involving the afterlife.

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