

Talking with Angel : about Illness, Death and Survival

by Evelyn Elsaesser-Valarino

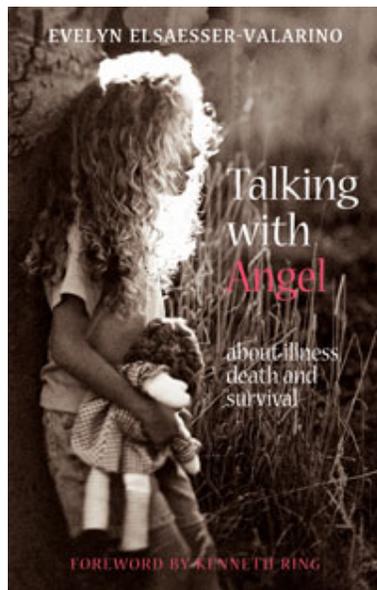
Foreword by Kenneth Ring

208 pages

2005

Floris Books Edinburgh

ISBN 0-863-15492-1



<http://www.florisbooks.co.uk/>

This is the moving story of a young girl battling leukaemia. She realizes she is going to die and receives hope and comfort through nightly conversations with her favourite doll Angel, who helps her embrace a new perspective on dying and the possibility that consciousness may survive after death. Her fear of death is ultimately lifted by her new-found spiritual wisdom and by the account of a near-death experience told to her by a young companion.

Evelyn Elsaesser Valarino's extensive knowledge of near-death experiences informs this astonishing book. It will be of great benefit and comfort to those facing their own death, or for parents and carers of those with serious illnesses. It will also enrich anyone who is reflecting on this essential aspect of life.

“From her acknowledged position as one of the world's most well-known researchers and writers on the near-death experience, Evelyn Elsaesser-Valarino produces an evocative and moving story about dying. Elsaesser-Valarino's triumph is in providing a genuine resource – not simply for all children and parents desiring education about

death and dying, but as one of the few books in the world one can put into the hands of a child who is facing a life-threatening illness.”

Dr Allan Kellehear, Professor of Palliative Care
La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.

”In ‘Talking with Angel’, Evelyn Elsaesser-Valarino has crafted a story of stunning emotional power that quickly draws the reader into her heroine’s battle with a life-threatening illness. What she learns during the course of her journey both shatters her world and transforms her worldview — as it is likely to do for you. You will not soon forget this book or the girl whose story it so movingly tells, and the book itself is, I think, destined to become a classic.

Honestly, I was very moved by the story’s emotional power and the depth of the teachings it conveys. I found the story gripping from the very beginning, but I think what hit me the most was the account Evelyn Elsaesser-Valarino wrote, in epistolary form, of James’ near-death experience. It is simply one of the best and richest accounts (even if it is fiction) of an NDE I’ve ever come across. I don’t think it is saying too much to claim that in itself this bit of writing is a masterpiece”.

Dr Kenneth Ring, Professor Emeritus of Psychology,
University of Connecticut, USA

Foreword by Professor Kenneth Ring

Plato taught us that the whole purpose of philosophy – his dialectic – was to prepare us for death. Nothing, in his view, was more important than this, and nothing has occurred in the more than two millennia since he lived to suggest otherwise. Death, and whatever may follow it, if anything, is still the great, seemingly unfathomable unknown, and the very thought of it continues to instill the deepest dread. And how much greater, then, the terror for someone actually facing an imminent descent into the void, the nothingness, of death. How can one possibly “prepare oneself” for the end of everything?

Plato, of course, gave us his dialogues to help enlighten us, and Evelyn Elsaesser-Valarino, the author of this emotionally riveting book, following in this tradition, has now furnished us with what is effectively a kind of *monologue* on this same subject. But just as Plato’s dialogues make for engrossing reading because of the liveliness of the interplay between Socrates and his interlocutors, so, too, has Evelyn hit on a literary device that compels from the start our deep engagement: She has written what appears to be a novel, or perhaps one might say more modestly, “just a story,” but in fact it is something else entirely. Just what it is and what it aims to accomplish is my task to explain in this introduction.

On the surface, *Talking with Angel* is the story of a young girl, told in the first person, who has contracted a serious disease. But don’t be under any misconception, perhaps suggested by the title, that this is still another story of sentimental claptrap designed merely to tug at the reader’s heartstrings. Or that it is a book about the supernatural intervention of angelic beings who bring inspirational messages of spiritual uplift and bland comfort. No, something else is going on here as we follow our unnamed heroine’s journey during the course of her illness – a journey which, thanks to the author’s literary skill and psychological insight, we also find ourselves taking with her.

Now, before going further, I need to note that of course it is not customary for a “novel” to require an introduction, and because this book has a novelistic form, it would be a disservice both to you and to the author if I were to divulge anything of the narrative line of the story that will unfold as soon as you start the book itself. However, because this book is not what it would at first blush appear to be, I can at least take a few liberties here to give you a sense of what this book is really about.

To begin with, from the outset, we are in the mind of the narrator, the young girl, and from the outset, we are gripped by the drama of her illness. We enter her mindstream, her thoughts and feelings, as her illness develops. It is as if we become her diary – she is writing, she is confiding her innermost thoughts, to us. She draws us into her illness and its vicissitudes, and thus it is that we find ourselves sharing her journey and becoming intimately connected with her – and with the people in her life. Ultimately, her anguish becomes our own – but so, too, are the things she learns during the course of her struggle to understand and come to terms with what has happened to her. And these insights, the knowledge that comes to her, we come to see are the most important things. They are really what the book is about and what the book is designed to teach us.

The girl could be anyone – hence she is not given a name and we know very little about her, not even her age – but at the same time, there is something special about this girl. At the beginning of the story, she is seemingly quite ordinary, but as her illness progresses, so does she – in her knowledge, in the depth of her character, and, ultimately, in the profound degree of spiritual wisdom she attains as she confronts the possibility of “the end of everything.” In short, this young girl goes through an accelerated course of personal and spiritual maturity so that by the time the book closes, she reminds of someone like Anne Frank and we realize that we have been privileged to read another young girl’s diary we will not soon forget.

During the course of our own journey through this book, we also come to appreciate that it is not a novel at all, notwithstanding its memoir-like form and the predominance of its interior monologue (though there is spoken dialogue as well). No, this is essentially a book of wisdom teachings – specifically, teachings about death and the possibility that something profound transcends death and can cast its light back on the living so as to transform them. And, just as with Plato’s dialogues, so *Talking with Angel* is at bottom a mind-stretching philosophical undertaking dealing with one of the great perennial issues but from a completely new contemporary perspective.

Much of Evelyn Elsaesser-Valarino’s life for over the past two decades has dealt with the phenomenon of the near-death experience, on which subject she is already recognized as an international authority. Her previous books and her many lectures have indeed gained for her a reputation as one of Europe’s leading figures in this field. So it is not surprising that it is the perspective of the near-death experience (or NDE, for short) that informs this book – and the life of her narrator (though in an unexpected way). But what Evelyn has done here is completely different from anything she has done before.

Her first book on the subject, *On the Other Side of Life*, was a scholarly and entirely academic treatment of the subject and consisted chiefly of interviews with various professionals in a number of diverse fields of specialization in which they commented learnedly on the NDE from the perspective of their particular disciplines. In her next book, *Lessons from the Light*, on which she collaborated with me, the focus was on what interested readers could learn from studies of the NDE so that

they might be able to apply their implications to their own lives. But in *Talking with Angel*, Evelyn departs completely from the world of the academy in order to tell a heartrendingly beautiful story from the heart that any person, even a child, could understand, relate to and learn from. Yet it is the special accomplishment of this book that everything essential about what the NDE teaches concerning what death is and about how life is meant to be lived from this understanding is conveyed so that any thoughtful reader can glean these insights and be transformed by them.

Which brings us finally to the questions of who this book is written for and how to make use of it. Clearly, from what I've already indicated, this is not "a children's book" or even one that is intended chiefly for teenagers or young adults – though readers from all of these groups could profit from it. Nor is it specifically intended for young persons who are ill or even facing death – though, again, such individuals are an obvious audience for a work of this kind. Similarly, one could highly recommend this book to parents of children suffering a serious illness since it provides such a vivid and compelling account of one young person's ordeal with the trauma of such a condition – and yet, once more, this category of reader is not necessarily the one that is most likely to benefit from reading the book.

I think you can see where I am heading with this. It's not that this book is meant for any one type of individual or for those in a special set of exigent circumstances. We are all death-bound, and we are all clinging to life; we are all in the same condition and we all will undergo the same fate. This book is for anyone who wants to break free of the cold grip of death. This is a book about liberation and how to attain it. Who could not be interested in it?

The book's method is not didactic, though there are teachings embedded in it. It is instead *experiential*. You learn from identification, through the natural power of empathy. The story will carry you: all you need to do is allow yourself to enter into the narrator's frame of reference, and together you two will do the necessary work. The narrator is not a fictional person – she is you. Becoming her, you will find yourself – and your way home.

*Kenneth Ring, Professor emeritus of Psychology
University of Connecticut USA*

Foreword by Professor Allan Kellehear

The history of open adult discussion about sex and death has a parallel history for children. There is a great ambivalence about talking with children about these sensitive topics. But worse still, there are few literary or visual resources for children about these topics. And although the topic of sexuality has gained much recognition in recent years from teachers, parents and health professions as an appropriate target of story, information and instruction, the same cannot be said about death, dying and loss.

Of the children's literature that does broach the subject of mortality most deal with a very biological, almost mechanical idea of death. The question of 'where people go when they die?' is often re-cast as 'why do people go at all?' These stories are meditations on the *naturalness of death as social disappearance*. Other children's stories attempt to explore the surprising complexity of grief when confronted with

bereavement over the loss of a family member. Evelyn Elsaesser-Valarino has left all these fledgling traditions of children's writing in her wake by going back to the heart of the matter of death and asking the original question: "Where do people go when they die?"

From her acknowledged position as one of the world's most well known researchers and writers on the near-death experience Evelyn Elsaesser-Valarino produces an evocative and moving story about dying from the point of view of a child with leukemia. The simplicity of her achievement hides the fact that she is able to sensitively and accurately juggle aspects of a younger child's concerns with an older child psychology. The child's talks with her doll 'Angel' beautifully capture the fear and naivete of an inexperienced life. The child's deepening relationship with a young male doctor contains faint echoes of would-be womanhood in the child-come-teen. In this way, the book will have wide relevance and appeal to the many ages of childhood. But there's more. Lest anyone think this is a 'girl's book' central messages and insights come from boy characters in the book. Their voices and experiences 'partner', parallel and underline those of the main female character.

Furthermore, the book respects uncertainty, giving its emotional expression its rightful place as a bringer of personal doubt - and hope. There is no suggestion that near-death experiences are 'facts' to be understood away from the personal experiences and social symbols that shape it. Like the wider global debate and research on near-death experiences Elsaesser-Valarino takes as her canvas the *experience* rather than entering an irrelevant discussion about speculative causes and correlations. The possible 'causes' of near-death experiences themselves cause endless debate but all sides agree that the *experiences* are genuine and - to those who have experienced them - 'real'. Elsaesser-Valarino then, charts her narrative around this personal reality of near-death experiences always leaving space for doubt, comfort, possibility and reflection.

Finally, the greatness of this book is not found in its sophisticated child psychology or the novel application of Elsaesser-Valarino's scholarly expertise. Rather Elsaesser-Valarino's triumph is in providing a genuine resource - not simply for all children and parents desiring education about death and dying - but as one of the few books in the world one can put into the hands of a child who is facing a life-threatening illness. The days are now past when, as adults we need to cast about for informational and reflective resources to help us contemplate our own death. Thankfully, bookshops everywhere have shelves of this material now. Not so in children's literature. "Talking with Angel" is pioneering literature for this neglected area and readership. Evelyn Elsaesser-Valarino's work is a wonderful work of caring for these children and their parents. Like "Talking with Angel" itself the words herein are a living act of love.

Allan Kellehear, PhD.

Professor of Palliative Care, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.