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Author explores life "beyond the divide"

Is there life after death? Edmonds author Rita Bennett feels she has enough evidence to support the belief that there is.

Her latest book, titled "To Heaven And Back," recounts the testimony of people who claim to have had near-death experiences. It has already sold 170,000 copies - most of them, presumably, to people who share this belief.

But what exactly is an NDE, as the shorthand refers to it?

Author Bennett says a near-death experience may be a sense of being dead; or peace and painlessness; an out-of-body experience; a life review; a reluctance to return; or a personality transformation upon returning.

Her husband Dennis, a retired Episcopal pastor, died in 1991. Rita says he had been having heart trouble but didn't want to go to a specialist. "He told me, 'Either God heals me or he takes me home,'" she says.

On All Saints Day the Bennetts were in their Edmonds home when Rita walked past her husband's office and saw him in his chair, which had toppled over. By the time medics arrived, Dennis, 74, was dead.

For Rita Bennett, the event spurred a spiritual odyssey which culminated in her eighth published book: "To Heaven And Back: True Stories of Those Who Have Made The Journey."

"It's very encouraging," she says, "because for all human beings the one thing we don't want is death. But when you listen to people who have had near-death experiences, you find a very large percentage are not afraid to die again."

Has the author had such an experience herself? No, she says. But a recent Gallup



Rita Bennett (right) numbers Edmonds Mayor Barb Fahey among her readers. After reading "To Heaven and Back," the mayor wrote the author with a glowing endorsement for her eighth published book.

Poll turned up eight million people who said they had.

Some people suggest a biblical explanation for such phenomena. And Rita Bennett happily agrees.

"There are boundaries the Scriptures give us," she says. "If we keep within those boundaries, we will be safe."

The author is well-known in the Puget Sound region for hosting the bimonthly television program "Praise Northwest" on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (KTBW-TV in Federal Way).

She has also appeared on the Christian Broadcasting Network's "700 Club," and maintains a busy speaking and seminar schedule. Her 32-hour course called "Emotionally Free," which has a 240-page syllabus, prepares others to impart her vision.

Rita Bennett's Christianity is eclectic. She was christened a Presbyterian, bap-

tized in the Assemblies of God, became a Southern Baptist in her teens and was confirmed as an Episcopalian.

Among her readers is no less a personage than the mayor of Edmonds. After purchasing a dozen copies of "To Heaven and Back" for friends, Mayor Barb Fahey wrote the author to say:

"Rita, I could not put your book down. It expanded my thinking. I had read a number of books on near-death experiences and that part was certainly encouraging. But your final chapters on a biblical picture of heaven were new information for me and especially inspiring."

Published by Zondervan/Harper Collins, the book sells for \$10.99 in paperback and can be ordered through The Edmonds Bookshop (775-2789) or directly from the publisher at 1-800-727-3480.