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BEYOND THIS LIFE

Edmonds author's book looks at near-death experiences, offers hope to many

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"Heaven is a place called Home from where we were created and where we will be totally at peace returning to our Creator, God.

Heaven is a place of friendship, beauty, history, purpose, acceptance, music, dancing, learning, loving, preparation, fulfillment and trust." Rita Reed Bennett.

After Rita Bennett's husband of 25 years, the Rev. Dennis Bennett, died suddenly six years ago, someone sent her a book about a woman who had been in a coma for four days during which she said she had gone to heaven.

The 70-year-old book, "Within the Gates," by Rebecca Springer, helped Bennett through her grief.

"Every night I read a little bit of it, and it made me feel better," she says. "It was healing to me to read the book."

Dennis had been having heart trouble - an Asian flu virus had caused the return of a childhood heart murmur - though he didn't want to go to a heart specialist.

"He said, 'Either God heals me or he takes me home,'" Bennett says.

On Nov. 1, 1991 (All Saints' Day), the Bennetts were in their Edmonds home when Rita walked past Dennis' office and saw him in his chair, which had fallen over backward. She immediately called 911 and when medics arrived, they declared Dennis, 74, dead.

After reading Springer's book, Bennett wanted to study heaven more, so she read "every book I could find" about near-death experiences (NDEs) and heaven. Though Bennett had read accounts of heaven in the Bible, "it was nice to read about someone who's been there," she says. "My husband is there, so I wanted to know what it was like."

Bennett and her husband co-hosted a bi-monthly television show called "Praise Northwest," a two-hour talk show broadcast on the Trinity Broadcasting Network through KTBW-TV in Federal Way.

She continued to host the show after Dennis' death, interviewing three people who had rather elaborate NDEs. "Some people see a light and come back," Bennett says of some people's experiences, but those she talked to had encounters with angels or spirits, or with Jesus himself.

Bennett's brother sent her a copy of a tape from a conference in Tampa, FL of Texas doctor Gerard Landry's account of his NDE 18 years ago.

"It was meaningful to me," to hear him speak, Bennett says. "Then I talked to him on the phone and he was very comforting."

After reading and talking to people who claimed to have been there, Bennett wrote her own book, "To Heaven and Back: True Stories of Those Who Have Made the Journey," which was released last month. The book describes seven people's visits to heaven, including Landry's.

According to Gallup poll, Bennett says, about eight million people have had a near-death experience, though Bennett herself has never had one.

Through the years, NDEs have been controversial, giving rise to many schools of thought:

The "scientific" view says NDEs come solely from the brain, specifically the right frontal lobe. The "agnostic/atheist" view believes NDEs are strictly a psychological phenomenon. The "non-religious/non-biblical" perspective sees them as supernatural or mystical experiences, though "Christian cessationists" feel that supernatural experiences ended with the Bible. The final category, in which Bennett's book falls, is "Christians seeking God's truth," scripturally-based accounts of heaven.

The main purpose of Bennett's book, she says, is to "give people hope and a glimpse of heaven. It is to comfort the bereaved and prepare the dying for the next life."

Landry was in Washington last week being interviewed with Bennett on a radio show in Tacoma. Later that afternoon, sitting at a table on Bennett's front porch, the sun straining through the clouds, Landry, a distinguished white-haired gentleman, talks about his NDE and how it created for him a greater love for Jesus.

Ten days after Landry and his wife returned home from a five-month trip to Israel - March 29, 1979 - he suffered a massive, unexpected heart attack.

"The pain was so bad," he remembers. "I felt a suffocating pressure on my chest, like a strangling sensation."

He was rushed to the emergency room, and when he saw his heart rhythm on the electrocardiogram, he knew it was serious. "The worst thing was the guilt and fear (I felt) when I thought about dying," he says. A few seconds later, his heart stopped.

He says he felt his soul, his spirit, rising from his body. "There was no tunnel and I wasn't looking down," he says. "In the twinkle of an eye, I was in another place."

"I can't describe the experience fully, in earthly terms," he says. "There was a brightness, a whiteness that I can't describe, but it was not man-made. I was aware of the bright light and a timelessness, as if I had always been there."

Landry says he saw "a multitude of people" of all different races and colors. They were all adults wearing long, white robes that went down to their feet. "The robes were transparent, as if there was no insides," he says.

I felt a relationship of closeness, what I would call love," Landry says. "I wanted to embrace them, there were no areas of dissension. It was a perfect love."



He also says he saw Jesus on the cross with his torso bent forward, hands and feet pierced with nails, and looked up into his eyes.

"It was as if he was in compassionate suffering for me, for all of mankind," Landry says of his vision of Jesus. "He said, 'Gerry' - he knew my name - 'Gerry' my peace be with you.' For him to say that was so touching. ...There was no more pain, anxiety, fear, guilt or shame," Landry recalls.

He says Jesus told him to read the gospel of John, John's first two epistles and John's Revelation. Then, as more souls entered heaven, Landry says, the bright light disappeared and he was back in his body.

During the four minutes that he was physically dead, doctors tried to resuscitate him, giving him an external heart massage and electric shocks. Also, his lung had collapsed and he was put on a respirator.

Landry remained in a coma for more than 10 hours. "I was aware of everything around me, but I wanted to go back," he says. "It was a glimpse of heaven"

Bennett, a petite blonde with warm, expressive green eyes, describes heaven according to the Bible and other people's accounts:

After entering gates of pearl inscribed with the names of 12 apostles, Bennett says the walls of heaven are made of jasper. A river flows down from God's throne and a street paved with transparent gold is lined with fruit trees on either side. Bennett says heaven is large enough for 30 trillion people. Heaven knows no gender or religion boundaries. Everyone is equal.

"Everyone sees heaven a little differently," Bennett says, "but when we have all the facets together, we have a greater picture."

Landry describes heaven as probably being like the Garden of Eden. "I've traveled a hundred different countries, but I would love to live there," he says.

Not only was Landry's visit to heaven beautiful, it was life-changing.

Two weeks after his experience, his heart showed no signs of damage, his collapsed lung healed, as was the little finger he broke while in Israel.

After his experience, Landry says he pondered why Jesus said those things to him.

"It was to eliminate all sins, even physical and emotional pain," he concluded. "It reassured me of his compassion...A perfect love will cast out all fears."

Landry feels that from this experience he was commissioned to tell others of Jesus' love. "He wanted me to share my love with everyone," he says.

"I'm more concerned about relationships with people (now)," says Landry, who has eight children and 10 grandchildren.

He emphasized relationship-building and being at peace with oneself.

"Try to give love to others, touch, hold hands, say 'I love you.' Try to relate with others and what they're going through.Tolerate and accept people, more than anything.

"People worry about their past, they relive it in their memory," he says. "If we have the Spirit of God in us, we can live fully a life of peace."